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## **Clothing Sacred Scriptures. Materiality and Aesthetics in Medieval Book Religions**

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# 1 Clothing Sacred Scriptures

## Materiality and Aesthetics in Medieval Book Religions

In the early twelfth century, Turgot, the prior of the monastery of Durham, composed the *Life of Margaret*, the shortly deceased queen of Scotland. In an attempt to convince his readers of Margaret's true sainthood, he not only provided a long list of her pious deeds but concluded reporting a miracle he judged most suitable for a person so devoted to teaching and meditating on sacred scripture:

She had a book of Gospels beautifully adorned with jewels and gold, and ornamented with figures of the four Evangelists, painted and gilt. The capital letters throughout the volume were also resplendent with gold. For this volume she had always a greater affection than she had for any others she was in the habit of reading. It happened that while the person who was carrying it was crossing a ford, he let the volume, which had been carelessly folded in a wrapper, fall into the middle of the stream [...]. It was sought for a long time, but was not found. At length it was found at the bottom of the river, lying open, so that its leaves were kept in constant motion by the action of the water, and the little coverings of silk which protected the letters of gold from being darkened by the contact of the leaves, were carried away by the force of the current. Who would imagine that the book would be worth anything after what happened to it? Who would believe that even a single letter would have been visible in it? Yet of truth it was taken up out of the middle of the river so perfect, uninjured, and free from damage, that it looked as though it had not even been touched by the water. For the brightness of the leaves, and the form of the letters throughout the whole of the volume remained exactly as they were before it fell into the river, except that on the margins of the leaves, towards the edge, some trace of water could with difficulty be detected. The book was conveyed to the Queen, and the miracle reported to her at the same time, and she having given thanks to Christ, esteemed the volume much more highly than she did before.<sup>1</sup>

Although this account is presented as an event from Margaret's life, its true protagonist is an individual book. What is introduced as proof of the sainthood of a human being turns out to be a demonstration of the holiness of this particular book.<sup>2</sup> We learn that this object is at once vulnerable and potent, easy to lose and splendid, in need of diligent care and capable of imposing its superior force. All this is even more interesting as, however

one may judge Turgot's miracle imputation, his account is related to a real and still existing Gospel book, nowadays kept in the Bodleian Library.<sup>3</sup> Not long after Margaret's death, another version of the same account was added to folio 2r of this manuscript.<sup>4</sup> From this inscription in the book we learn that an individual book-object with particular material properties is at the very center of this story.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, this might remind us of events from our own time in which the sacredness and physicality of holy books intermingle. For example, when the American president elect lays his hand on a book he has consciously chosen and performs the oath of office while touching the pages or the binding of this book. Physicality has also been an issue in violent episodes of book burnings that we have seen in the past years. Incinerated Qur'ans and Bibles have repeatedly ignited turmoil and sparked homicide. Apparently, these stories point to differing conceptions of the holiness of books. The book burnings follow a metonymic logic, according to which each copy of the Qur'an or the Bible is considered to be an integral part of sacred scripture. The ritual of the inauguration and Turgot's miracle story are based on the assumption that holy books are individual objects whose power depends equally on their history and on their material shape.

Probably the best way to better understand these different conceptions of sacred books' power is to go back to the biblical Book of Exodus which offers an archetypal narrative of the origin of sacred scripture, embedding it in the remote history of the Israelites' flight from Egypt. Three months after they crossed the Red Sea and escaped the troops of the Pharaoh, the Israelites arrive at the wilderness of Sinai. Then, Moses, their leader, is called to climb the top of the mountain on which God has descended in a huge cloud. In this elevated and hidden place, God's Law is revealed to the prophet in thundering words. As a sign of the pact between Yahweh and Israel, Moses is handed the essence of the Law, the Ten Commandments, on "the

<sup>1</sup> Turgot, *The Life of S. Margaret, Queen of Scotland*, 3 (ed. Metcalfe 1895, 315–316). For an edition of the Latin text, see Turgot, *Vita s. Margarithae reginae Scotiae*, 3 (ed. Henschenius et al. 1698, 329).

<sup>2</sup> See Gameson 1997; Bridges 2005, 106–110.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, it is a small lectionary (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Lat. liturg. fol. 5). See Rushforth 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For a transcription and translation, see Gameson 1997, 165–166.

two tablets of the Pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God” (Ex. 31,18).<sup>5</sup>

In this account, sacred scripture’s power is explained by a close link to divine origin: the words on the tablets are words uttered by Yahweh, and the letters on the tablets are letters written by God’s hands. It is easy to imagine the tablets being the starting point of a chain of text transmission where each copy is invested with power by its filiation with the divine original. In this sense, the Sinai story gives the most authoritative explanation for calling a sacred text the word of God. This model applies also to the much more frequent cases in which a sort of collaboration between God and human beings is assumed, whereby the wording and the writing fall under the responsibility of the human author.

Yet, as the same Book of Exodus teaches us, the power of sacred scripture comes not from the wording and writing alone. In a remarkably long and detailed passage, Yahweh instructs Moses how the Tablets of the Ten Commandments have to be enshrined and adorned in order to create the conditions for God’s presence over these writings:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; [...] And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats’ hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood. [...] And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you make it. They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. Overlay it with pure gold—overlay it inside and out—and make upon it a gold molding round about. Cast four gold rings for it, to be attached to its four feet, two rings on one of its side walls and two on the other. Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold; then insert the poles into the rings on the side walls of the Ark, for carrying the Ark. [...] And deposit in the Ark [the tablets of] the Pact which I will give you. You shall make a cover of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide. Make two cherubim of gold—make them of hammered work—at the two ends of the cover. [...] They shall confront each other, the faces of the cherubim being turned toward the cover. Place the cover on top of the ark, after depositing inside the ark the Pact that I will give you. There I will meet with you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.” (Ex. 25,2–22)

Reading this passage in the Book of Exodus, one is struck by the extreme attention that God and his prophet pay

to the materials and the visual aspect of this enormous shrine of sacred scripture. Even before he is handed over the stone tablets in which God has written the Decalogue with his own finger, Moses receives detailed instructions for how they are to be adorned: how their container, the Ark of the Covenant, shall look, which materials have to be used for its construction, which artist is most capable of executing this work, and what else should be part of the tablets’ dwelling. And when Moses, after having smashed the first pair of tablets, climbs down from Mount Sinai for the second time, he immediately gathers his people and asks them to contribute materials for the construction of the Ark and the other elements of sacred furniture that are then crafted by Bezalel.<sup>6</sup> For the narrator it is clear that storing the tablets outside the Ark would have been an inconceivable act of profanation—and in fact no word is said about what Moses did with the tablets before the Ark was ready. Finally, when Bezalel and his collaborators complete their work, and the tablets are put into their richly adorned container, a cloud is said to have descended on the Ark, making God’s presence visible.

Both the stories about the making of the tablets and the miraculous preservation of Margaret’s Gospels are archetypes for the phenomena that are discussed in this volume. In the very moment sacred scripture is created, its ornament becomes an issue. The question is not if sacred scripture should receive ornament but how this ornament should look and in what kind of media it should be realized. In short, the Mount Sinai account as well as Turgot’s miracle tale provide impressive evidence of sacred scripture being deeply involved in what recently has been called the materiality of religion.<sup>7</sup> A decade ago, the anthropologist Webb Keane put it in the trenchant formula: “Religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms. It is in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences.”<sup>8</sup>

Most contributions to the field of material religion are dedicated to objects and practices that could be considered the “other” of scripture: to images, relics, ex votos and amulets, to rituals and other performative practices. This preference is understandable as a reaction against the long dominion of text-oriented research in the study

<sup>5</sup> All citations from the Hebrew Bible are after *Jewish Study Bible. Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (ed. Berlin/Brettler 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For Bezalel as biblical archetype of an artist, see Legner 2009, 135–137.

<sup>7</sup> See Morgan (ed.) 2010; Engelke 2012; Promey (ed.) 2014; Plate (ed.) 2015; Pongratz-Leisten/Sonik (eds.) 2015; Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.) 2016; Hutchings/McKenzie (eds.) 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Keane 2008, S124.

of religions. Yet as the narratives in Exodus and in Margarita's Vita demonstrate, excluding scripture from the issue of religion's inherent materiality would miss an important point and ultimately perpetuate the dichotomy that recent research seeks to overcome. Against such an opposition, several scholars have rightly drawn attention to the materiality of scripture itself. In his seminal article *The Three Dimensions of Scripture*, the religious scholar James W. Watts claims that "scriptures [...] are not just texts to be interpreted and performed. They are material objects that convey religious significance by their production, display, and ritual manipulation."<sup>9</sup> Adding to that his colleague S. Brent Plate states that:

Regardless of their semantic meaning, words and—by extension—sacred texts exist in and through their material, mediated forms. Words are primarily seen and heard. They are printed, written, chiseled, carved, painted, as well as sung, spoken, digitally recorded, dramatized, echoed. [...] Visually speaking, words are seen more often than is realized, and it is in the seeing of words, whether printed or written, in a carefully designed layout, that religious experiences can occur. Whether talismanic or technological, visible or seemingly invisible, words have existed through religious cultures as objects that are experienced before and beyond their semantic meanings.<sup>10</sup>

As a paradigm of research, material religion is part of a broader methodological shift towards issues of materiality in the Humanities.<sup>11</sup> While important theoretical impetus for this new perspective came from anthropology, ethnology and archeology, that is from the field of studies in material culture, other more text-based disciplines have developed a specific interest in the materiality of books, charters and other writings: in historiography, literary studies, paleography or musicology, the relevance of elements such as layout, coloring, graphic signs, and traces of use is now widely acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> Quitting a long tradition of distilling texts by removing their alleged accessories, these disciplines have started to discuss the iconic, spatial, multisensorial and performative aspects of books as objects. Art history has considerably widened its traditionally narrow focus on illuminations and initials,

looking at the shape of the entire manuscript, its making and use, its covers and its spatial structure.<sup>13</sup>

## 1 Sacred scripture: canon, commentary, clothing

In this volume, the turn from scripture as content to scripture as object is applied to and explored for the three religions that included the Mount Sinai episode in their prophetic tradition; Judaism, Christianity and Islam evolved as textual communities that were centered on sacred scripture.<sup>14</sup> In the Qur'an, the term *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the book), testifies to the fact that this similarity was perceived at an early stage: Christians and Jews were thought to have the same foundation of scriptural revelation, if also in an imperfect manner.<sup>15</sup>

In modern scholarship, common features of *ahl al-kitāb* have been seen in shared textual practices: first of all, the formation of a "canon," of a corpus of texts that could not be altered or expanded and led to the exclusion of texts regarded as non-sacred, be it apocryphal or heretical.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, there is consensus that this corpus needed to be accompanied by a growing collection of commentaries: texts that established hermeneutical rules for reading the canon, differentiated between lower and higher levels of interpretation, authorized certain interpretations against others and adapted these readings to changing cultural contexts and historical situations.<sup>17</sup> Whereas these two categories have been regarded for a long time as the essential features of sacred scripture, recent scholarship has emphasized a third constitutive element: complementary to canon and commentaries, material devices come into play by which scripture is perceived and performed as an aesthetical, tangible and visible object. In analogy to Bezalel who crafted the Ark, countless scribes, painters, goldsmiths, embroiderers and ivory carvers were engaged in crafting what the title of this book labels "clothing sacred scripture."

<sup>9</sup> Watts 2006, 137.

<sup>10</sup> Plate 2007, 157–158.

<sup>11</sup> See Miller (ed.) 1998; Miller (ed.) 2005; Tilley et al. (eds.) 2006; Bennett/Joyce (eds.) 2010; Kalthoff/Cress/Röhl (eds.) 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Nichols 1990; Bornstein/Tinkle (eds.) 1998; Busby 1999; Kiening/Stercken (eds.) 2008; Johnston/Van Dussen (eds.) 2015; Meier/Ott/Sauer (eds.) 2015. For a more systematic and theoretical approach, see Krämer 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See Schmidt 2003; Lowden 2007; Hamburger 2009; Cohen 2010; Tilghman 2011; Ganz 2015; Rudy 2015.

<sup>14</sup> See Stock 1983, 88–151; Haines-Eitzen 2009; Stroumsa 2015, 103–135.

<sup>15</sup> See Madigan 2001, 193–213; Stroumsa 2003, 153–158.

<sup>16</sup> For canonization as cultural phenomenon, see Assmann/Assmann (eds.) 1987; Assmann 1997, 103–129; Becker/Scholz (eds.) 2012. For canonization as historical process, see Kooij/Toorn (eds.) 1998; Alexander (ed.) 2007; Jacobsen (ed.) 2009; Lim 2013; De Smet/Amir-Moezzi (eds.) 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See Schmid/Renz/Ucar (eds.) 2010.

In contrast to canon and commentary, whose historical developments and cultural mechanisms have been the topic of intense scholarly discussion, the material and aesthetic side of sacred scripture has fundamental theoretical implications that are only beginning to be explored. Clothing sacred scripture constituted an area of collaboration between religion and art, where art has the power to transform written texts into holy objects.

In this introductory essay, I will discuss some key concepts, models and areas of research that are relevant to a systematic approach towards the role of the arts in medieval *ahl al-kitāb*. This approach has to be a strongly interdisciplinary one. In this regard, the following text is the result of a long journey in the territory between art history and religious studies that in the past ten years has proceeded on pathways toward the aesthetics of holy books. The first chapter introduces the concepts “religion of the book” and “inlibration” and proposes ways to adapt them to the materiality of books. The second and the third chapter will focus on “iconicity” and “ornamentality” as two categories that complement each other in the artistic transformation of holy books. Each chapter develops these categories into a cluster of topics that I consider useful as orientation for further research and as points of comparison. Since it would be contradictory to discuss issues of materiality without reference to concrete objects, the second and the third chapter include a number of examples.

## 1.1 Book religions: from texts to objects and rituals

The modern scholarly term “book religions” has been introduced as a differential category that allowed comparing religions in a systematic perspective.<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly, the history of this concept was determined by a conspicuous bias: when Friedrich Max Müller, the founder of religious studies, coined the term in the late nineteenth century, he thought of a sharp hierarchical divide between the “aristocracy of real book-religions” and the “the vulgar and nondescript crowd of bookless or illiterate religions.”<sup>19</sup> This judgmental approach was still perceptible when specialists of ancient near eastern cultures converted

Müller’s stratification into an evolutionary model: in 1950, the egyptologist Siegfried Morenz proposed a diachronic reconstruction of religious history that led from (older) “cult religions” to (younger) “book religions.” The turn from one type to another, Morenz argued, occurred “when the range of the cult was curtailed and written records were put into the midpoint of worship communities.”<sup>20</sup> Historically, he located the first transition of this kind in the kingdom of Juda between the late seventh and the mid-fifth century BCE. Recently, the egyptologist and historian of religions Jan Assmann has included this model in his studies on the rise of monotheism.<sup>21</sup> Harking back to a terminology introduced by Theo Sundermeier, he defines monotheistic religions of the book as “secondary religions” that arose “from a radical rupture with tradition”: “To these belong all religions which are not derived from a remote past and immemorable tradition but from historical acts of revelation and foundation.”<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the historian of religions Guy Stroumsa has proposed a different typology that considers book religions in opposition not to “cult” but to “sacrifice” and therefore leads to a remarkable chronological shift versus what he calls the “religious revolution of late Antiquity:” “To encapsulate the nature of this transformation, one may perhaps speak of the ‘end of sacrifice,’ in reference to the fact that at the time of Jesus, religion meant, for Jews and Greeks alike, the offering of sacrifice, while the situation had changed in some radical ways in the sixth century.”<sup>23</sup> For Stroumsa, the “end of sacrifice” is intimately connected to new ideals of interiority and the perfection of the inner self, goals that could be achieved through the regular reading of sacred texts.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly, the category of “book religions” has not been undisputed. In fact, it may be doubted if the kind of universal taxonomy that Müller proposed solves more problems than it creates. Looking for “book religions” in all cultures and times bears the risk of ending up with criteria that are too vague or too normative.<sup>25</sup> Instead of this approach, one may fruitfully apply “book religions” as a comparative term for limited contexts of neighboring faiths. In making use of this term for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, I want to highlight a group of common traditions and comparable features that these

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, see Colpe 1988; Lang 1990; Stine 1994; Graham 2005. For a comparative approach to the three Abrahamic religions of the book, see Denny/Taylor (eds.) 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Müller 1873, 102. While the term “book-religions” was introduced by Müller, the history of the concept goes back to the eighteenth century with authors as Giambattista Vico, William Warburton and Immanuel Kant, see Lang 1990, 144–145, and Assmann 1996, 56–61.

<sup>20</sup> See Morenz [1950] 1975, 385.

<sup>21</sup> See Assmann 1996. A good discussion is in Schaper 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Assmann 2001, 97 with reference to Sundermeier 1987, 417–418.

<sup>23</sup> Stroumsa 2015, 27–28. See also Stroumsa 2009, especially 56–83.

<sup>24</sup> See Stroumsa 2009, 1–55.

<sup>25</sup> For discussions of these methodological problems, see Graham 2005, 8194–8195; Rüpke 2005; Luft 2014, 6–14.

communities share. This does not mean that we have to ignore the considerable differences between Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures. That the Tanakh, the New Testament and the Qur'an have different structures and comprise dissimilar textual genres is obvious. Yet I do not see such dissimilarities as an obstacle to the fruitful application of an overarching concept.<sup>26</sup>

My point is not to reject but to suggest a different understanding of the concept of “book religions”: what I see as the shortcoming of all previous discussions is the exclusive focus on the textual dimension of sacred scripture.<sup>27</sup> Book religions are discussed as ultimately immaterial religions in which rituals, objects and other material factors have no particular relevance. In light of the material turn, a reformulation of the concept and a reevaluation of the materiality of sacred scripture is overdue.<sup>28</sup> To do so, I will return for a moment to Jan Assmann's idea that the shift from primary to secondary religions leads to an “expatriation of the sacred out of the world”:

Primary or cult religions deal with the sacred that manifests its presence in the world (*ἐπὶ τοῦ κόσμου*). The priests' acquaintance with the sacred requires sanctity in terms of *ἁγιότης*. [...] Secondary religions nihilate this difference since the sacred cannot be found inside the world anymore. The only thing that can still be considered to be *ἐπὶ τοῦ κόσμου* or *sacer* is sacred scripture, the *biblia sacra*.<sup>29</sup>

What this passage highlights, rightly I think, is the role of book religions in the establishment of the distinction between immanence and transcendence that superseded the older distinction between the profane and the sacred.<sup>30</sup> Following this assumption, religions of the book evolved in a context of existing religious communities whose cult was centered on other, non-textual objects: images, shrines, relics, talismans, sanctuaries or sacred places. Their introduction was based on a critique of these pre-existing cults which were rejected in favor of a clear distinction between immanent and transcendent spheres. That notwithstanding—and here I dissent from Assmann—religions of the book were based on material media, and especially on those objects that preserved the divine revelation in its written form. It seems much more appropriate therefore, to describe the (admittedly idealized) process of

book religions' emergence in terms of a transfer of sacredness: a transformation that invests sacred texts with the sacredness formerly owned by other objects.

Against the standard models of book religions, three aspects of this transfer need to be underscored: the importance of holy books as visible and tangible objects; the relevance of ritual practices involving holy books; and a complex, if sometimes contradictory relationship between holy books and other cult objects. To sum up, book religions can be characterized by the adoption and transformation of elements that come from cult religions. It is misleading to consider these as “impurities” or “compromises” in the pursuit of an immaterial ideal that failed to be realized in Jewish, as well as in Christian and in Islamic cultures. With regard to the last point, it needs to be emphasized that a conflictual tension between the sacralization of holy books and the desacralization of other objects has repeatedly become an issue in the history of the three faiths.

Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions share the belief that sacred scripture contains words of divine revelation.<sup>31</sup> This postulate of a non-human, transcendent origin had to be asserted in contexts where other, non-sacred practices of writing and reading are already known: sacred scripture is by no means connected to primordial practices of writing and reading. There is no claim that writing itself is a sacred practice with divine origins. This means that as book religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam always have to make a distinction between the Book and books, between the Word and words, between Scripture and writings. The sacred text has to be set against a majority of non-sacred texts. This opposition to other, profane or mundane texts needs to be articulated on a material level.

## 1.2 Levels of inlibration

In order to define contrasting approaches of Islamic and Christian communities towards God's manifestation to humankind, the philosopher Harry A. Wolfson has coined the term “inlibration.”<sup>32</sup> For Wolfson, inlibration is the Islamic counterpart to the Christian concept of ‘incarnation’: where Christian faith is based on the belief in the incarnation of the pre-existing, uncreated Logos, he argued, Islamic religion has been founded on the belief

<sup>26</sup> See Stroumsa 2003; Brague 2015, 97–102.

<sup>27</sup> This critique applies also to Stroumsa. Although he repeatedly discusses the impact of the change from scroll to codex in late Antiquity, his understanding of book religions is focused on the private reading process, as his witty formula of Christianity as the “religion of the paperback” shows. See Stroumsa 2009, 41–44.

<sup>28</sup> For a similar stance, see Luft 2014, 14–25.

<sup>29</sup> Assmann 2001, 100.

<sup>30</sup> See Schulze 2015, 124–137.

<sup>31</sup> For an overview, see Deninger [1987] 2005; Wießner et al. 1995. Recently, Angelika Neuwirth has advocated a more differentiated view of revelation in the Qur'an, see Neuwirth 2015, 223–228.

<sup>32</sup> See Wolfson 1976, 244–263.

in the inlibration of the pre-existing, uncreated Qur'an. Recently, this concept has been critically re-evaluated by scholars of Islamic religion. As several authors argue, the Qur'an gains its full potential as divine revelation only in the act of oral recitation.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the Islamic religion would be focused more on voice and memory and less on letters and material books.<sup>34</sup> Contrary to Jewish and Christian rituals, no liturgy of the book takes place during the regular prayers inside the mosque.<sup>35</sup>

What I propose, is a different use of Wolfson's neologism in a broader and transreligious perspective. Religions of the book share the belief that scripture is the result of a process by which divine truth and wisdom are transformed into words of human language and ultimately, into graphic signs to be written into books. This does not exclude the idea that these books get integrated into complex settings of elaborate recitation, intense meditation or extensive use of other sacred media (such as holy sites, images, relics or the Eucharist). What the term inlibration implies is the indispensable presence and contribution of material objects to the process of divine revelation. In each of the three Abrahamic religions this role is so powerful that the attribute "Word of God" is assigned to sacred scripture.

For a deeper analysis of religious book cultures, two different levels of inlibration should be differentiated: (transmaterial) texts and (material) books. Usually, when it comes to the "sacredness" of scripture, only the textual level of inlibration is taken into consideration. The classic example for this is the process of canonization that leads to a distinction between those texts that constitute the core of divine revelation and others that do so to a less extent or even not at all. This selection implies scenarios of inspiration that explain how human persons might have been able to become transmitters of divine revelation. Sometimes, sacred texts contain self-referential statements about their own origin, a tendency that is especially strong in the Qur'an, but also in the Revelation of John and prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>36</sup> Still on a textual level, commentaries create a centralizing framework around scripture, explaining and evidencing their revelational quality.<sup>37</sup>

Yet for the purpose of this volume it is essential that this kind of text-related discourse is inseparably intertwined with a material dimension of book-aesthetics: adorning sacred scripture visually and materially with elaborate artistic techniques, handling the books in which the sacred text was written, venerating these objects, reciting and memorizing their letters constitute fundamental religious acts that enhance the belief in the inlibration of divine revelation. The importance of these practices is very evident in the Pentateuch account of Moses receiving instructions from God on Mount Sinai, but is less clear in modern discussions of religions of the book. It is the aim of this volume to expand the field to any artistic practice that contributes to the configuration of the basic medium of scripture: the book, understood as a three-dimensional, material, visual and tactile object.

### 1.3 Crossing religious borders

Applying categories such as "book religions" and "inlibration" offers a chance to abandon the focus on single textual communities that has hitherto prevailed in research on book art. There are of course important reasons for the specialization in objects that belong to single religious groups, be it linguistic competences in Hebrew, Arab, Greek and Latin, intimate knowledge of specific religious traditions or art historical expertise in determined fields of artistic production. Asking for a comparative and trans-cultural approach to religious book culture does not mean to put this specialist knowledge into question. Rather, it is an invitation to a dialogue about various strategies for "clothing sacred scripture" that involve objects and practices from different religions. Conducting this dialogue across established borders will offer new insight into parallels and divergences, synchronies and phase-shifts, innovations and imitations and therefore contribute to a more differentiated picture of the aesthetics of inlibration.

The labels "Judaism," "Christianity" and "Islam" stand for communities that are closely intertwined and that develop reacting to each other. The term "Abrahamic," as problematic as it may be, indicates a common tradition of revelation that the three faiths share.<sup>38</sup> It also points to geographic proximity, shared territories and borders, and a long history of exchange and encounters, with the Mediterranean playing the role of "an exceptionally important place of interaction, competition, and, at times, of

<sup>33</sup> See Madigan 2003; Neuwirth 2010, 158–168; Neuwirth 2015, esp. 233–236. See also Wallraff 2013, 54–62.

<sup>34</sup> See Kellermann 1995; Neuwirth 2010, 168–174; Schulze 2015, 245–322.

<sup>35</sup> See Ergin 2008.

<sup>36</sup> For the Qur'an, see Madigan 2001; Wild (ed.) 2006. For the Revelation of John, see Gradl 2014.

<sup>37</sup> For the development of concepts of human authorship in sacred scripture, see Wyrick 2004.

<sup>38</sup> For recent contributions on Abrahamic religions, see Silverstein/Stroumsa (eds.) 2015; Stroumsa 2015. For a critique of the term, see Hughes 2012.

conflict among Jews, Christians, and Muslims [...] in which members of these religions have defined their identity ever more sharply in relation to one another, in which sectarian division characterized all three religions, and in which there has existed a constant flow of population.”<sup>39</sup> With regard to this intense and sometimes violent interaction, there are good reasons for a synoptical approach that includes both comparison and analysis of exchange. As neighboring religions, Judaism, Christian and Islam were in need of visualizing their specific identity: since at their foundation was a claim of exclusive truth, they had to define a set of markers that distinguished them from their competitors. On many occasions, the rivalry about this common source induced a show of intolerance and hostility and led to the defamation of the competing *ahl al-kitab*.<sup>40</sup>

To intensify research on the material and aesthetic side of scripture will enable us to overcome the simplistic concept of religions as monolithic entities. In fact, it is important to stress that “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “Islam” are abstract categories that span a rather variegated field of different subgroups. Privileging the textual dimension of these communities has had the effect of leveling their discrepancies and of producing homogeneous confessional entities. This is due to the fact that the process of canonization was remarkably successful in producing sacred texts that are highly resistant to change and alteration. Yet this does not mean that Jews, Christians and Muslims of the twenty-first century deal with the same books as their predecessors in the first millennium. For once we shift from the textual to the material side of the phenomenon, we will gain an extremely sensitive indicator for historical transformation and regional diversity in one and the same religion. Therefore, I basically agree with Aaron W. Hughes when he states that

closer examination of the three generic religions that comprise the even more generic category “Abrahamic religions” reveals porous boundaries and much greater complexity than originally meets the eye [...]. Rather than imagine “Jews,” “Christians,” and “Muslims” working with or against one another, we need to examine specific, localized encounters that involve shared cultural vocabularies or semantics around which various subcultures within each of the so-called religions themselves. Some of these subcultures may well exhibit greater similarities with subcultures of the other two “religions” than they do with those we often think of as their own.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Abulafia 2015, 121.

<sup>40</sup> See the articles of Thomas Rainer and Maria Portmann in this volume.

<sup>41</sup> Hughes 2012, 119.

Complicating things even more, artistic skills and techniques, materials and artifacts, forms and rituals circulated on their own pathways, crossing borders of faith, language and culture. Especially research on Jewish book art has dedicated much energy in conceptualizing extremely complex constellations of cross-religious hybridity: Jewish scribes who collaborated with Christian illuminators for Jewish patrons, haggadah manuscripts that came into the possession of Christian monks.<sup>42</sup> Other investigations have highlighted the mobility of “Eastern” artefacts such as Islamic silks and seals, Byzantine ivories and pagan cameos that traveled to Western Europe and were appropriated for Christian bookbindings (figs. 1.7, 1.10, 1.18).<sup>43</sup>

Chronologically, the focus of this volume is on the Middle Ages, comprising the time between 400 and 1500. The main reason for the choice of this timeframe is that it ensures a set of comparable material conditions of book production in the Christian, Jewish and Islamic cultures, the essential common feature being manuscripts of parchment or paper written and illuminated by hand. When typographic printing techniques spread through Western Europe, the materiality of books started to change dramatically. From the sixteenth century onwards, the diffusion of the printing press affected the production and the reception of religious books both in Jewish and Christian communities.<sup>44</sup> The impact of this change was even more noticeable in the areas of evolving Protestantism that aspired towards greater accessibility of the Bible in vernacular translations, whereas sacred scripture lost ritual significance in public worship.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough, there has been a strong resistance to typographic book-print in Islamic cultures: in the Ottoman Empire, typographic reproduction was banned to Muslims until the 1720s. The production of printed copies of the Qur’an in Islamic countries began only in the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Also for Jewish Torah scrolls, the use of printing

<sup>42</sup> See Kogman-Appel 2004; Shalev-Eyni 2010; Mann 2014; Stern/Markschies/Shalev-Eyni 2015 and the article of Sarit Shalev-Eyni in this volume. For instructive examples of shared practices and materials in Byzantine and Islamic cultures of the early Middle Ages, see Nelson 1988; Nelson 2005; Evans/Ratcliff (eds.) 2012.

<sup>43</sup> See Wilckens 1990; Shalem 1996; Wittekind 2008; Ganz 2010; Toussaint 2012; Ganz 2015, 32–63.

<sup>44</sup> For a recent overview, with selected references to the immense bibliography, see Finkelstein/McCleery 2013, 45–66. See also Pettegree 2010; Buskirk/Mareel (eds.) 2016.

<sup>45</sup> See especially Shevchenko 2007, 66–91. For the impact of the Reformation on books and reading, see also Burkhardt 2002, 48–63; Sandl 2011, 65–130.

<sup>46</sup> See Bloom 2001, 215–226; Albin 2005.



technology was considered unacceptable. All these later developments, which are beyond the historical scope of this volume, demonstrate once again the relevance of the materiality of holy books for religions.

## 2 The iconicity of holy books

Clothing sacred scripture may imply that books are displayed and looked at more than read, venerated more than understood. They gain the status of what one could call “iconic” objects. Recently, James Watts has emphasized how this iconic quality is constitutive for book religions. In his already cited article, *The Three Dimensions of Scripture*, he states that: “Scriptures are icons. They are not just texts to be interpreted and performed. They are material objects that convey religious significance by their production, display, and ritual manipulation. [...] The iconic dimension of scriptures finds expression in the physical form, ritual manipulation, and artistic representation of scriptures.”<sup>47</sup>

For the art historical perspective of this volume, it is crucial to reflect systematically on the difference between the object class of “icons” and the epithet “iconic.” Saying that scriptures are icons—what I will call, for the sake of brevity, the “books are icons” posit—points to an analogy or identity between sacred books and cult images: pictorial representations that are venerated as media of presence of the sacred beings they depict.<sup>48</sup> In a seminal essay, the biblical scholar Karel van Toorn has insisted on “a functional analogy between the Babylonian cult of divine images, [...] and the Israelite veneration of the Torah”:<sup>49</sup>

The sacred image and the holy book served the same function: they were each an embodiment of the sacred, and both were perceived as incarnations of God. Like the icon, the Book is both a medium and an object; as a medium, it refers the reader to a reality beyond itself, whilst as an object, it is sacred in itself. Presented as divine revelation, the cult symbol, be it an image or a book, tends to be perceived as being consubstantial with God.<sup>50</sup>

In a similar vein, the religious scholar Dorina Miller Parmenter has argued that Christian book rituals in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages shared important features with the cult of icons in contemporary Byzantium: the book of the Gospels was carried around in processions,

raised above the head of the deacon, lit with candles and enveloped with incense, kissed by the clerics and hailed as son of God by the congregation.<sup>51</sup>

In the introduction to his study, van Toorn emphasizes the iconophobic or aniconic context in which the “icon” of the Torah was introduced as “a substitute image.”<sup>52</sup> This important observation reveals a kind of common ground between religions that propagated opposing views on the use of sacred images. Yet on the other hand, if sacred books could be employed against sacred images, rejecting and condemning their veneration as idolatrous, and justifying their mutilation or destruction, a significant flaw of the “books are icons” posit comes to the fore: it means that ultimately, their common ground is not the sacred image but the sacred object. Historical evidence for a “books are different from icons” discourse is extremely rich and comprises the Jewish Decalogue, Islamic hadith that speak out on pictorial representations of sacred beings, as well as Christian iconoclastic discourses in Byzantium and in the Age of Reformation.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the “books are icons” posit ultimately oversimplifies complex situations in which books and icons usually constitute different object groups. The major insight that this argument is able to provoke is about cult practices and rituals: in some specific constellations sacred books were treated as if they were carriers of personal presence. This kind of handling is to be found in Jewish synagogues and Christian (Catholic) churches, but not in Islamic mosques or in Protestant places of worship.

Calling holy books “iconic” offers a much more compelling and fruitful if also less spectacular and provocative approach. To pursue this further, it seems useful to depart from Charles S. Peirce’s well-known concept of iconic signs as differing from indexical and symbolic signs: “An icon is a representamen which refers to its object merely because it resembles, or is analogous to, that object. Such is a photograph, a figure in geometry, or an algebraical array of symbols [...]. An icon is so independent of its object that it is immaterial if the latter exists or not.”<sup>54</sup> Following Peirce, icons are potential signs that may be regarded as representations of something else by their similarity. At this level, all objects are potentially

<sup>47</sup> Watts 2006, 137, 142.

<sup>48</sup> See Freedberg 1989, 27–40, 82–160; Belting 1990.

<sup>49</sup> Toorn 1997, 230.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>51</sup> See Parmenter 2006. For a detailed analysis of late antique and early medieval book liturgy in Latin Christianity, see Gussone 1995; Lentjes 2005; Heinzer 2009; Reudenbach 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Toorn 1997, 229. For similar conclusions from an art-historical perspective, see Kessler 2006.

<sup>53</sup> See the references in note 95.

<sup>54</sup> Peirce, *Definitions for Baldwin’s Dictionary: Icon. MS 1147* [ca. 1901/1902] (eds. M. Bergman/S. Saavola 2014).

iconic objects, and therefore all books are potentially iconic books. To be effectively activated, books have to be transformed and performed in a way that more or less forces their users to look at them as iconic objects. This change will happen when books are more than containers of texts—or, in the Peircean diction more than carriers of symbolic signs. Books become “iconic” objects when they are endowed with visual forms that may be looked at as a resemblance of something else. When we interpret the topic of this volume in this way, “clothing” sacred scripture refers to practices that lead to a condensation of iconicity in holy books.

In view of traditional art-historical discourses, adopting the concept of iconicity marks a radical departure from the powerful paradigm of “illustration” which implies that artistic decoration of books has to be analyzed in terms of a visual translation of texts into pictures.<sup>55</sup> The underlying assumption is that these pictures offer a repetition or variation of what is already being said in the text. Iconicity is reduced to one option, while others are neglected or completely ignored. In the following, I want to highlight four alternative possibilities of sacred scripture’s iconic dimension.

## 2.1 Books as spatial configurations

The famous Qur’an fragments from the Great Umayyad Mosque in Şan‘ā’ contain remnants of an opening with two facing representations of buildings (fig. 1.1).<sup>56</sup> Within an ornate frame, several rows of arches rise one above the other. What at first glance appear to be depictions of upright structures turn out to be ground plans of buildings that are divided into several naves, built around a central court, and preceded by staircases and doors. These architectures are certainly not meant as illustrations of buildings mentioned in the text. Most art historians have tended to interpret them as an allusion to contemporary mosque buildings. In fact, single elements such as lamps, columns, arches, and the central court have been shown to bear close similarities to the spectacular mosque buildings under construction during the Umayyad period.<sup>57</sup> On

the other hand, as Finbarr Barry Flood argues, the position of these pictures in the book is meaningful. In the original state, their place was on the first pages of the manuscript. As Flood reminds us, this kind of architectural frontispiece finds close parallels in Jewish and Christian books. Therefore, it is plausible that these pictures had a double reference: they represent both the buildings where the Qur’an would have been recited and the sacred text as building whose threshold the reader is about to enter.

When depictions of architecture are placed on the first pages of sacred scripture, it is emphasized that books are spatially structured objects.<sup>58</sup> The relevance of this topological dimension became an issue in late Antiquity when two diverse book formats, roll and codex, competed with each other before the younger one eventually superseded its older rival.<sup>59</sup> As Bruno Reudenbach explains, the main difference between these configurations was their topological matrix:

Therefore, the roll can be understood as a surface without articulation, which ideally is endless and whose material constitution does not provide any specifications for the use of this surface. The codex, quite differently, partitions the unstructured continuum of the roll and defines clearly enclosed units, the rectangular pages [...]. With the parceling in page units, and even more so with their arrangement in succession and in a row the codex gathers additionally a spatial dimension. Therefore one could say that the roll unfurls along a plane and the codex additionally in depth.<sup>60</sup>

As has been repeatedly pointed out in recent studies, this fundamental change in media history was driven by religious forces, especially by the rise of Christian communities that preferred the codex format from the very beginning.<sup>61</sup> Yet to characterize this development as a mere substitution of one format by another would be far too simple, as a closer look reveals: when Christians started to produce their first books—between the first and the third century CE—codices were thin booklets, consisting of a small number of sheets and quires, that were used for occasional writings and not at all for literature.<sup>62</sup> Later on, when the codex was established as the official format for authoritative books, it had considerably grown into a

<sup>55</sup> A classical example is Weitzmann 1970.

<sup>56</sup> See Bothmer 1987. The sheets belong to a group of 25 folios from the same manuscript that have been detected in the *genizah* of the Great Mosque of Şan‘ā’. According to von Bothmer, the original codex measured 51 x 47 cm and comprised 520 folios. For recent discussions of the date and function of this Qur’an manuscript, see George 2010, 79–86; Déroche 2014, 107–116.

<sup>57</sup> See Flood 2012 (b).

<sup>58</sup> On this still rather unexplored topic, see Perelman 2007; Müller/Saurma-Jeltsch/Strohschneider (eds.) 2009; Ganz 2016.

<sup>59</sup> See Roberts/Skeat 1985; Harris 1991; Blanck 1992; Winsbury 2009, 15–34.

<sup>60</sup> Reudenbach 2009, 60–61.

<sup>61</sup> See Resnick 1992; Skeat 1994; Gamble 1995; Hall 2004; Grafton/Williams 2006; Hurtado 2006; Klingshirm/Safran (eds.) 2007; Nicklas 2007; Seeliger 2012; Wallraff 2013.

<sup>62</sup> See Wallraff 2013, 19.



Fig. 1.1: Frontispieces with architecture, Qur'an fragment, eighth century. Şan'ā', Dār al-Makhtūṭaṭ al-Yamaniyya, IN 20-33.1.

huge, multi-quire structure. While the new format gained prominence in the Roman Empire, Jewish communities decided to keep the roll format for their writings, including the Sefer Torah. Yet also in this case, a modification of the structure took place: whereas the early Torah consisted of several smaller scrolls (*ḥomashim*), it was transformed into a “single monumental scroll” in the mid-third century, a huge and heavy “ritual object” made out of parchment.<sup>63</sup> Still some centuries later, Muslims adopted the by then common codex structure for copies of the Qur'an. During the Abbasid period, the *muṣḥaf* (the material copy of the Qur'an) was commonly produced in a particular oblong format that “had the advantage of creating an immediate visual distinction with books other than the Qur'an,

including bibles and Arabic writings.”<sup>64</sup> Probably at the same time, Jewish communities, who by then lived mostly under Islamic dominion, started using the (vertical) codex format for books other than the Torah, designating it as *miṣḥaf*, a word derived from the Arabic *muṣḥaf*.<sup>65</sup> At this point, all three religions disposed of books with distinct and well recognizable spatial structures that required specific ways of handling these objects.

On the other hand, the format question, which has attracted so much scholarly attention, is but one factor in the larger set of operations that clothing sacred scripture encompassed. In fact, it needs to be recalled that codices

<sup>63</sup> See Stern 2017, 39–40.

<sup>64</sup> George 2017, 123. See also Blair 2008; George 2010, 38–40 and 74–89; Flood 2012 (b).

<sup>65</sup> See Stern 2017, 65–68; Liss 2017, 91–98.





Fig. 1.1: (Continued).

and scrolls continued to be employed for different purposes, sacred and profane, throughout late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Nor should the discussion of this issue induce a teleological perspective in media history: when we look at the development of the codex from a small number of sheets to thick, multi-quire volumes, we see a series of steps that comprehensively altered the topological potential of these objects.

Spatial structures in the book were always related to the architectural space of the synagogue, the church, the mosque. With regard to the large Qur'an manuscripts of the Umayyad period, Alain George explains that these books were deployed in mosques by Umayyad authorities, where they would be read and seen during the ritual, especially Thursday invocations (*du'a*) and Friday prayer. For the rest of the week, they were stored in wooden

coffins within the same mosque or taken to the palace [...] Once opened in front of worshippers, their size and layout would have made them stand as a physical embodiment of the divine Word, visible from afar in the prayer hall.<sup>66</sup>

In this framework, George concludes, “a multilayered relationship between Qur'ans and religious architecture can be discerned” which is especially striking in the case of the *Ṣan'ā'* Qur'an: “Building and manuscript seem to have been made to function in concert, mirroring and completing each other.”<sup>67</sup>

In the Jewish synagogue, the place where the Torah scroll was stored constituted the very focus of the

<sup>66</sup> George 2017, 119.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 119.

congregation. Normally, the scroll was framed by multiple layers of enshrinement: the niche, the ark (*teivah/aron*), the curtain (*parokhet*), the case (*kufsa/tik*) or the mantle (*me'il*).<sup>68</sup> When the ark was opened for the liturgy, a procession took place that crossed the space of the synagogue and led to the platform of the *bimah* where the scroll was unfurled for reading.<sup>69</sup> Ruth Langer has shown how liturgical commentaries of the medieval Ashkenazi tradition tended to connect “the ritual space of the synagogue, the contemporary place of proclamation, with the historical proclamations of Sinai and Zion.”<sup>70</sup> In manifold ways, the spatial iconicity of the Torah could be marked by architectural representations, for example by microarchitectures on the Torah finials (*rimmonim*) and a tower-like appearance of the ark.<sup>71</sup>

Complementary to that, sacred scripture was thought to mediate between the outer space of the book and the inner space of the believer’s soul. “Edification” is the appropriate keyword for an imaginary building process that should transform the inner self into a space that facilitated access to the divine.<sup>72</sup> Doorways, arches, windows or entire facades were elements that should help readers to mentally construct and to move along imaginary topographies of the text.

## 2.2 Books as revelational apparatus

Clothing sacred scripture transformed books into iconic objects that visualized the spatiality of revelation. If we are right in assuming that the distinction between transcendence and immanence is an important peculiarity of book religions then we should expect that artistic endeavors of clothing were directed on locating books at the threshold between those spheres, qualifying them as media of revelation.

The complex and paradoxical topology of the threshold is now the subject of a vast literature.<sup>73</sup> With regard

to books, the most influential model is Gérard Genette’s typology of the paratext where the French literary historian classifies elements such as title-pages, tables of contents, fore- and afterwords that somehow interfere in the communication between books and their users.<sup>74</sup> Despite its now classic status in literary, book, film and manuscript studies it is important to emphasize that Genette’s typology is tailored to commercial and industrialized book production in Modernity. When older book-cultures, and especially manuscripts, are examined, it needs to be thoroughly reformulated.<sup>75</sup> Still more importantly, when it comes to the very special case of sacred scripture, a double threshold should be taken into consideration: the Genettian threshold between the books and the world of their users, and the threshold between books and the transcendent sphere.

Clothing sacred scripture amplifies the spatiality of the material book, linking it to the inaccessible, immaterial and invisible realm of the divine. Comparing Jewish, Christian and Islamic examples, we can identify common areas for highlighting these thresholds: on the one hand, the exterior of books, their encasement, envelope, cover or binding; on the other, the beginning of texts or chapters inside the manuscripts and the border area on single pages. With regard to book-beginnings, there are important points in common between the Ṣan‘ā’ Qur’an opening (fig. 1.1), the architectural framework of canon tables in the first section of Christian Gospel books (fig. 1.2),<sup>76</sup> and pictures reminiscent of the facades of sacred buildings that introduce the single books of the Pentateuch in Hebrew Bible manuscripts (fig. 1.3).<sup>77</sup> As these examples show us, it is due to artistic interventions that books, be it scrolls or codices, can be experienced as media of revelation when they are unclosed, unfurled, opened, paged through, folded and shut.<sup>78</sup>

Discourse about revelation has a strong tendency to describe this process in terms of sensory experience. “Revelation” itself is ultimately a visual metaphor based on the idea of veils or curtains that are pushed aside. Other notions of this concept may evoke images of descent and inspiration as Angelika Neuwirth has highlighted for the terminology of the Qur’an,<sup>79</sup> or a secret communication in

<sup>68</sup> For the early typology of Torah shrines and Torah arks, see Meyers 1997; Hachlili 2000; Rodov 2010; Yaniv 2017, 5–20. For Torah cases, see Yaniv 1997; Yaniv 2002, and Thomas Rainer’s article in this volume.

<sup>69</sup> For the liturgy of the Torah, see Langer 1998; Langer 2005; Stern 2017, 44–48. For an analysis of similar aspects in the liturgy of the Gospel book, see Heinzer 2009, and Vladimir Ivanovici’s article in this volume.

<sup>70</sup> Langer 2005, 130.

<sup>71</sup> For the book as house, see Lipis 2011, 116–125.

<sup>72</sup> See Caldwell 1991; Whitehead 1998; Harris 2002.

<sup>73</sup> The most influential points of departure remain Gennep [1909] 1990 and Turner 1969. For recent contributions, see Endres/

Wittmann/Wolf (eds.) 2005; Mukherji (ed.) 2011; Achilles/Borgards/Burrichter (eds.) 2012; Bawden 2014; Jacobs 2017.

<sup>74</sup> See Genette [1987] 1997.

<sup>75</sup> See for example Smith/Wilson (eds.) 2011; Ciotti/Lin (eds.) 2016.

<sup>76</sup> See Laffitte/Denoël/Besseyre (eds.) 2007, 203–204, no. 55a. For canon tables in general, see Nordenfalk 1938; Reudenbach 2009; Ganz 2016, 72–75.

<sup>77</sup> See Tahan 2007, 43–45.

<sup>78</sup> See Schneider 2002; Hamburger 2009; Ganz 2016; and Rostislav Tumanov’s article in this volume.

<sup>79</sup> See Neuwirth 2015, 223–227.

visions and dreams.<sup>80</sup> In any case, these are processes that go beyond the letters in a book. While books containing sacred scripture are the ultimate medium of revelation, the written text should not be taken for the revealed truth itself. Hermeneutical models teach that readers have to proceed beyond the written letter. Iconic elements may be used to visualize this potential of books as media capable of producing revelational elements.

In the First Bible of Charles the Bald, made in mid-ninth century Tours, a huge frontispiece precedes the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John (fig. 1.4).<sup>81</sup> And revelation is indeed the very topic of this original composition; in the upper part of the picture, the Apocalyptic Lamb and the Lion from Juda approach the Book with the Seven Seals whose appearance is described in Revelation 5. The book is set on a giant throne built of gold and silver which is clad with a cloth of red silk. This powerful image of revelation through a book is elucidated by a second scene in the lower register that shows the removal of a white fabric from the sitting figure of an aged, bearded man. While the man, who is to be identified as Moses, tries to hold back the cloth that covered him, the three winged animals that represent the evangelists Mark, Luke and John, pull at the textile with their teeth and claws. The fourth member of the group, Matthew's angel, is trumpeting in the man's mouth. The same beings return in the upper picture, displaying four opened Gospels. For any reader there is strong evidence to understand the two scenes as a pictorial model of divine revelation: a process that unfolds the hidden and mute truth of the Old Testament in the New Testament, and therefore connects both parts of Christian sacred scripture as they are combined in this manuscript.

Looking beyond such specific iconographies of revelational subjects, one could argue that the large group of book images that are commonly identified as "illustrations" ultimately serves the purpose of emphasizing the revelational nature of sacred scripture. A promising way to reassess a large corpus of mainly narrative book illuminations may be followed when these pictures are treated less as a visual reduplication of content already available in the text than as an invitation to experience the revelational function of holy books.<sup>82</sup> Impressive examples for this can be found in illuminated *maḥzorim*, Jewish prayer books for special Sabbaths and Festivals that were initially intended for the use of the cantor in the synagogue and

later changed into books for the private use of single worshippers. Let us have a brief look at one of the most beautiful of these smaller editions, the Tripartite Maḥzor which was produced in Konstanz around 1322 (fig. 1.5).<sup>83</sup> The beginning of the prayers for Shavuot (Festival of the Revelation on Sinai and of the Giving of the Law) is marked by a huge panel that overlays the word *adon* (the Lord), written in huge golden letters, with a picture that shows Moses kneeling on Mount Sinai and receiving the Tablets of the Law while his brother Aaron and the Israelites wait for him and pray. Like the Apocalypse frontispiece, this is also a scene of revelation (according to Jewish tradition, Moses received not only the Tablets of the Law but also the Torah when he ascended Mount Sinai) but at the same time there is a complex interplay between text and image that visualizes that the words of the prayer have a potential that goes beyond the written text; the letters point to the Tablet of the Law and are activated by the six trumpets that sound from heaven. At the same time, they get enlaced by the tendrils of two trees that grow between the two groups of men and women, collectives that prefigure the worshippers in the synagogue while the prayer is recited.

## 2.3 Books as sacred bodies

While spatiality and revelation belong to a common ground for book art of all Abrahamic religions, artistic decoration that evokes an anthropomorphic body constitutes the other, much more controversial end of the spectrum. Especially in Christian contexts books for ritual use could be clothed in quite a literal sense and be enveloped in corporeal representations of God. On Western covers of Gospel books this is the predominant option.<sup>84</sup> Since late Antiquity, treasure bindings presented Christ in sculptural, three-dimensional forms as the celestial ruler of the world, sitting on a throne, as if his body were emanating from the book (fig. 1.6).<sup>85</sup> In Carolingian times, artists started to depict Christ hanging on the cross, often accompanied by his mother and his disciple, John the Evangelist (fig. 1.7).<sup>86</sup> The representation of Christ's naked

<sup>80</sup> See Ganz 2008; and Vera Beyer's article in this volume.

<sup>81</sup> See Ganz/Ganz 2016, 28–35.

<sup>82</sup> See Hamburger 2009; Krause/Schellewald (eds.) 2011.

<sup>83</sup> See Shalev-Eyni 2010, 43–51. For the codicological data and a reconstruction of the original shape in two volumes, see *ibid.*, 191–196.

<sup>84</sup> See Ganz 2015, especially 64–105. See also Steenbock 1965; Lowden 2007; Toussaint 2013; Ganz 2014; Ganz 2017 (a).

<sup>85</sup> Pair of book covers in gold repoussé, gemstones, pearls on wood, original samite silk on the spine. For a contemporary illuminated Gospel book. See Laffitte/Taburet-Delahaye 2001.

<sup>86</sup> Pair of book covers; front cover: gilt silver, gemstones, antique cameo, engraved silver, enamel on wood; back cover: engraved silver on wood; green velvet on the spine. The cover was commissioned by





Fig. 1.2: Opening with canon tables of the first canon, Gospels from Metz, ca. 840/850. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. lat. 9383, fol. 2v–3r.





Fig. 1.2: (Continued).





Fig. 1.3: Initial page of Deuteronomium, Pentateuch, early fourteenth century. London, British Library, Add. 15282, fol. 238r.



**Fig. 1.4:** Apocalypse frontispiece, First Bible of Charles the Bald, 845/846. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. lat. 1, fol. 415r.

body visualized the sacramental potential of the Gospel book which remembers Christ's salvific death in the same words that the priest would use during the consecration of bread and wine. The sculptural artworks on the covers deliberately provoke a kind of short-circuit between the

incarnation of the divine Word in human flesh and the inlibration of the divine Word in the material book.<sup>87</sup>

While there can be no doubt that such straightforward strategies of anthropomorphic iconicity were intimately linked to specific Christian concepts of inlibration, it should be emphasized that there were considerable margins for iconic embodiment on and around holy books in Jewish as well as in Islamic communities. In particular, Jewish cult

abbot Johannes III Simmerl, for an illuminated Gospel book made in 1030/1040. See Klemm 2004, 158–161. For crucifixion imagery on book covers, see Ganz 2015, 106–155.

<sup>87</sup> In her article in this book, Gia Toussaint discusses treasure bindings with relics that enhance this strategy of embodiment.





Fig. 1.5: Revelation at Sinai and giving of the Law, initial word panel for the first day of Shavuot, Tripartite Mahzor, ca. 1322. London, British Library, Add. 22413, fol. 3r.





**Fig. 1.6:** Christ and the four evangelists, back cover, Third Gospels of the Sainte-Chapelle, ca. 1260/1270. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. lat. 17326.

practice fashioned a personal, bodily identity for the Torah that was enhanced through book ornaments. Sarit Shalev-Eyni has drawn our attention to an Italian illumination in a manuscript with Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* that connects the word *ahavah* (Love) with the depiction of a man embracing a Torah scroll enveloped in a textile cloth (fig. 1.8).<sup>88</sup> While this depiction may allude to the Christian iconography of Mary holding the infant Christ, as Shalev-Eyni points out, the Jewish liturgical practice of putting the huge roll with the five books of Moses in a mantle and decorate it

with a crown (*'atarah/keter*), must have evoked the appearance of a king or a queen.<sup>89</sup> Later on, the finials and the breastplate (*tass/ziz*) added to that noble picture.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> For a female gendering of the Torah as queen and bride, see Wolfson 1995, 1–28 (Female Imaging of the Torah. From Literary Metaphor to Religious Symbol).

<sup>90</sup> For an overview, see Landsberger 1952/1953; Gutmann 1983, 5–11; Yaniv 2007; Stern 2017, 48–55. See also Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1982 (Torah binder/*avneit*); Cohen 2001 (Torah mantle/*me'il*); Feuchtwanger-Sarig 2004 (Torah pointer/*yad*); Gelfer-Jørgensen 2004 (Torah finials/*rimmonim*). Medieval Torah ornaments have been almost completely destroyed, for a discussion of objects before 1600, see Mann 1996.

<sup>88</sup> See Shalev-Eyni 2008, 142.





**Fig. 1.7:** Crucifixion, front cover, Gospels from Niederaltaich, 1496. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 9476.



**Fig. 1.8:** Man holding the Torah scroll, initial word panel for Ahava, Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, first half of the fourteenth century (text), late fourteenth century (illumination). Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms 4° 1193, fol. 32r.

Generally speaking, the construction of an iconic body for scripture and the assimilation of the book to a living person are efficient means to put emphasis on the efficacy of inlibration: in and through the book, the godhead himself speaks to the believers.<sup>91</sup> In terms of media history, this concept goes back to the widespread idea of writing as an extension of a speaking body who is captured in the graphical signs of the letters.<sup>92</sup> This means that the performative act of reciting scripture is seen as shared agency by which the iconic body of the book and the human body of the lector collaborate with the transcendent godhead. Departing from this constellation, holy books may develop an agency of their own and ultimately assume traits of a fetish or a talisman that have the power to act without actually being activated through a lector.<sup>93</sup>

Besides recitation, the performance of holy books comprised other activities that evoked the interaction with a sacred being: in prescriptions for the handling of the Qur'an, a personal dimension of sacred scripture becomes manifest. In early Islam, concerns about the purity or impurity of persons who touched the Qur'an were a matter of intense discussion. They show that tactile contact with the *muṣḥaf* was considered more problematic than the oral recitation of Qur'anic verses.<sup>94</sup> Similar apprehensions about physical contact with the book inform Jewish regulation of how the Sefer Torah should be handled during the liturgy; these are condensed in the famous saying: "He who touches a naked Sefer Torah will be buried naked."<sup>95</sup> And burial was indeed an issue for the Sefer Torah itself: worn and damaged copies of the sacred text needed to be deposited in hidden places attached to synagogues known as *genizot*. Once these chambers had filled up, their contents had to be buried in the earth.<sup>96</sup> Similar practices of book disposal were known in medieval Islamic cultures, but with a broader spectrum of options; in addition to the storage of worn books in locked chambers and interment, "incineration, sinking in a body of water, washing and erasing, cutting, enveloping and intercalating in book bindings" were used.<sup>97</sup> As Finbarr Barry Flood points out, these practices "may reflect tensions between

the theological invulnerability of scripture as the word of God and its vulnerability as an artifact subject to wear."<sup>98</sup>

## 2.4 Idolophobia and self-reference

In any case, the transformation of books into "iconic objects" is a complex process. This is also due to the fact that only within the framework of book religions could the use of images be condemned, their fault being the multiplication and therefore falsification of the one and only God's true nature.<sup>99</sup> That the establishment of monotheism and the emergence of book religions created potential for a vehement critique of idolatry, as has been repeatedly stated, seems essentially plausible.<sup>100</sup> As is well known, Jewish and Islamic communities banned figurative idols from their places of worship. In Jewish and Islamic contexts, the idea that sacred scripture should take the place formerly occupied by idols had an absolute priority. This also meant that no Torah scroll and no copy of the Qur'an could be made that included depictions of human bodies, since they would have produced new idols. Only in other sacred books that did not belong to the "core" of divine revelation were anthropomorphic pictures admitted. In sharp contrast to this attitude, Christians cultivated the idea of Christ's flesh as having taken the place of Jewish sacred scripture.<sup>101</sup> This concept left wide margins for negotiating the relation between different media—sacred scripture, the altar sacrament and images—in flexible constellations. Generally, the idea of a certain convertibility among these media, and especially between text and image prevailed, as for example expressed in the letters of Gregory the Great to bishop Serenus of Marseille in 599/600.<sup>102</sup> That notwithstanding, idolophobia was certainly a familiar issue in medieval Christianity.<sup>103</sup> A good indicator of these sensibilities is the special treatment that liturgical Gospel books received in artistic decoration: in many cases, the texts that preserved Jesus' life have less images than illuminated books in general.<sup>104</sup> And in specific circumstances—the era of

<sup>91</sup> For the identification of the Torah with Yahweh, see Wolfson 2005; Tigay 2013.

<sup>92</sup> See Derrida [1967] 1976, 6–26; Camille 1985; Müller 1988; Wenzel 1995, 204–225.

<sup>93</sup> See Sabar 2009 (Torah); Schreiner 2000 (Christian books); Flood 2014, 475–481 (Qur'an).

<sup>94</sup> See Zadeh 2009; Svensson 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Rothkoff/Rabinowitz 2007, 243. See Milikowsky 2000.

<sup>96</sup> See Beit-Arié 1996; Habermann 2007; Schleicher 2010. In the Middle Ages, these practices were extended to all written documents bearing Hebrew letters: it was script and not the text that made them sacred.

<sup>97</sup> Cohen 2006, 136. See also Sadan 1986.

<sup>98</sup> Flood 2012 (b), 291, note 21.

<sup>99</sup> For the idolatry discourse in Islamic cultures, see Naef 2007; Elias 2013. For the debate in Byzantium, see Barber 2002; McClanan (ed.) 2005; Brubaker 2012; Elsner 2012.

<sup>100</sup> See for example, Assmann 2006.

<sup>101</sup> See Assmann 2013, 25–36.

<sup>102</sup> See Chazelle 1990; Brown 1999. For the discourse on this topic in Byzantium, see Lange 1969.

<sup>103</sup> See Hoepts (ed.) 2007.

<sup>104</sup> This applies to early medieval Gospel books, as highlighted by Saurma-Jeltsch 1997.

iconoclasm in Byzantium, the early Carolingian Empire, and the reformist movements led by Zwingli and Calvin—in which the idolophobic stance prevailed, we encounter a discourse that insisted on the fundamental difference between text and image and therefore also between holy images and holy books. Sacred scripture, as Theodulf of Orléans wrote shortly before 800 in the *Libri Carolini*, cannot be compared to sacred images, since it is the sole medium of revelation that God has authorized, and the only one that is trustworthy in teaching doctrine and reliable in transmitting the documents of eternal life.<sup>105</sup>

To sum up, the iconicity of sacred scripture is always an ambivalent and sometimes a controversial issue. In any case, proscription of sacred pictures would not have the effect of transforming sacred books into “aniconic” objects as it often has been stated—on the contrary, the absence of images in books as well as on other sacred objects or in buildings produced an extremely strong iconic effect.

In addition to that, figurative images in and on holy books often comprise self-referential elements that put the very mediality of the book in the foreground. On the shimmering surface of an early eighteenth century Torah mantle now in London, we find an embroidered image—an elaborate Torah ark with a pair of twisted columns, a curved gable with the inscription “Crown of the Law” carrying a huge crown (fig. 1.9).<sup>106</sup> Behind the semi-open doors of the ark, another Torah scroll is visible, vested with its own mantle. Hence, a *mise en abyme* takes place by which the mantle points to itself and thereby counters idolatric or fetishistic perceptions of the Torah. This is by no means a postmedieval feature: on one of the Gospel books donated by Saint Louis for the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, Christ is depicted holding a codex on his lap (fig. 1.6). As companion to the celestial ruler, this book represents a celestial scripture in which two texts mingle, the Book of Life and the Gospels. In the corners of the cover, we see the human authors of the Gospels at work, meditating, writing, cleaning their utensils, and thereby producing four slightly differing translations of the divine book presented by Christ. Interestingly enough, Christ is framed by two identical altars on which the opened Tablets of the Law and the veiled chalice of the Eucharist have been placed. Jewish Law and Christian Sacrament,



**Fig. 1.9:** Silken Torah mantle with embroidered applications, 1720/1725. London, Jewish Museum, inv. no. 62.

the cover suggests, share the same origin in the divine Logos, but differ in their power to transform into something that transcends scripture.

Instead of a building or a body, clothing sacred scripture can represent just books. Despite their different religious and historical contexts, representations of books (and authors) on or inside books that we encounter in Jewish, Christian and Islamic book art produce one and the same basic effect: they establish an iconic self-reference by which the real book points to itself and gets at the same time linked to other, imaginary books.<sup>107</sup> In other words, what we notice here is a kind of self-referentiality that belongs to the prehistory of phenomena that art history has considered for a long time a signature of modern or early modern self-consciousness.<sup>108</sup> What the abundant “bookish” imagery in religious book art

<sup>105</sup> *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum (Libri Carolini)*, II.30 (ed. Freeman/Meyvaert 1998, 303–322), 303–322. See Freeman 1994; Kendrick 1999, 36–45.

<sup>106</sup> Barnett (ed.) 1974, 18 (no. 62). The mantle comes from the Hambro’ Synagogue in London.

<sup>107</sup> See Ganz 2015, 158–223.

<sup>108</sup> Rosen 2003; Rimmele 2007. See Stoichita [1993] 1997; Krüger 2001.



can teach us is that self-referentiality has a long history in which religious concerns about immanence and transcendence play a predominant role.

Nor do we need to look for this aspect of books' iconicity only in the realm of figurative *mise en abyme*. The iconicity of writing (*Schriftbildlichkeit*) could be exposed in many possible ways.<sup>109</sup> Script in scripture is never simple writing but always for display—an effect that is produced by the selection of particular writing materials, particular styles of shaping the letters, and by a special handling of threshold elements such as the beginnings of books or chapters, initials, and ends of paragraphs.

### 3 The ornamentality of holy books

Complementary to iconicity, a second approach to “clothing sacred scripture” consists of exploring the intimate connection between “holy books” and “ornament.” In fact, the first ideas that come up when we are confronted with the materiality of medieval book religions are probably glowing surfaces, colored pages, precious textiles and beautifully formed letters, objects such as the spectacular initials of early medieval Insular Gospel Books, the micrographic interlace of Hebrew Bibles or carpet pages in Qur'an manuscripts, to mention only some of the most salient examples. To explore this aspect further, we have to address some fundamental misunderstandings and shortcomings in modern discussions of book ornament. Despite important critical interventions, “ornament” is still widely treated as a rather peripheral category that only adds to but changes nothing in the essence of artworks and texts.<sup>110</sup> Even worse, ornament is often judged as the opposite of the image, and therefore especially appropriate for book art in “aniconic” cultures.<sup>111</sup>

The contributions to this volume supply rich evidence that the iconic and the ornamental should be considered more as two complementary perspectives on the same phenomena: if the iconic dimension is more about how holy books are experienced and what they represent, the ornamental dimension is mainly about how holy books are transformed and what they do. Ornament is always related to something it embellishes, it presupposes an action of decoration that is executed on or around objects and persons. This relational nature is still present in Gottfried Semper's theory of ornamental forms generated by textile techniques while it is rather obfuscated in later literature that conceptualized ornament as a formal structure of repeated patterns.<sup>112</sup> In the following, instead of sticking to a narrow concept of compositions of detachable motifs, I will argue for a broader understanding that goes beyond the phenomena commonly addressed as ornament and approximates what Jean-Claude Bonne has aptly called the “ornamentation of art.”<sup>113</sup>

The essential point about this relational approach is to respect the object that ornament decorates. Following Jonathan Hay, a specialist of Chinese Art, we can conceptualize book ornament as a “surfacescape” that is articulated according to the spatial structure of the book: it may form envelopes, cases and other types of enshrinement, it may accentuate openings through symmetrical arrangement of carpet pages, it may frame text blocks, fill empty areas of the page or be attached to specific letters of the written text.<sup>114</sup> In many instances, several of these devices will be combined in order to create a multilayered decoration that comprises and articulates the entire space of the book. Which areas and elements of the book receive ornamentation tells us a great deal about the concepts behind them.

<sup>109</sup> For theoretical models of *Schriftbildlichkeit* see Krämer 2003. For the iconotext, see Wagner 1996 and Horstkotte/Leonhard (eds.) 2006. For the iconicity of the page, see Bornstein/Tinkle (eds.) 1998. For some historical case studies that overlap with the topic of this volume, see Kendrick 1999; Cutler 2004; O'Driscoll 2011; Tilghman 2011. <sup>110</sup> Criticism of this marginalisation of ornament goes back several decades, with most of the interventions coming from fields of Islamic and East Asian Art History. See Grabar 1992, 9–46; Necipoğlu 1995, 61–87; Hay 2010, 61–89. For Western medieval art, see also the series of fundamental contributions by Jean-Claude Bonne, for example Bonne 1996; Bonne 1999; Bonne 2000.

<sup>111</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point, see Finbarr Barry Flood's article in this volume. Among the most important recent contributions are Ceccarini et al. (eds.) 2000; Beyer/Spies (eds.) 2012; Dekoninck/Heering/Lefftz (eds.) 2013; Tietenberg (ed.) 2015; Necipoğlu/Payne (eds.) 2016.

<sup>112</sup> See Semper 1860. For recent reevaluations of Semper's approach, see Papapetros 2010; Payne 2010, 25–64; Schneider 2012.

<sup>113</sup> Bonne 1996, 209. In the terminology proposed by Jonathan Hay, this would be “decoration” from which “ornament” represents a smaller subset, see Hay 2010, 68–77. Beyer and Spies propose a distinction between “ornament” and “ornamental,” using the latter as overlapping term with iconic, see Beyer/Spies 2012.

<sup>114</sup> “A topography of sensuous surface—a surfacescape is the principal feature shared by two-dimensional and three-dimensional decorative objects. Moreover, important as volume, mass and trajectory are in our transactions with the latter, we get to know their object-bodies simultaneously through their surfacescapes, for directed attention to individual artefacts is unable to separate the object's shape and materiality from visible surface.” Hay 2010, 67.



### 3.1 Clothing

A strong anthropological paradigm for this relational activity is the act of clothing a body that Barbara Schellewald and I have chosen as the guiding metaphor for this volume. What is interesting about the metaphor of clothing is the power of transformation that it elucidates.<sup>115</sup> Clothing conveys social identity by transforming the surface of bodies. It confers the power to act in a given social role. This also implies that clothing creates distance: it prevents direct contact and protects its wearer. Clothing has the power to transfigure bodies and to transport them into a symbolic place.

It is this power of transformation and transport that real clothing shares with the metaphorical clothing of ornament. When holy books are clad with color, ivory, gold, silver, gemstones, fine leather or fabrics, their elevated place in the “society” of writings and other objects is made visible. With regard to the special category of holiness, one could say that the transport effectuated by clothing books in ornament brings the categories of *sacer* and *sanctus* into play: in specific ritual contexts, the sacredness of scripture can only be perceived through the sanctification with ornaments. Coming back to Walter Benjamin’s famous formula, it could be argued that clothing generates the “aura” for scripture, and therefore “the unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be.”<sup>116</sup>

Complementary to creating aura and distance, dressing with ornaments enables physical contact with the very medium of the divine sphere. The lavish mantles of miraculous Madonna statues in the Catholic world are an impressive example of the widespread belief in this ability.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, clothing holy books can be considered an effective way to get in physical contact with these objects without actually touching them. This aspect is already present in Yahweh’s directives to collect materials from the Israelites for the construction of the ark. Late heirs to this tradition are early modern Torah binders (*avneit*) made from the cloth on which a circumcision had taken place, rectangular pieces of linen that were cut into a long strip and decorated as a girdle for the Torah scroll.<sup>118</sup> This “cut that binds,” as

<sup>115</sup> For an overview, see Schneider 2006 and Dudley 2011. For clothing as metaphor, see Peterson 1934; Hollander 1978; Gordon 2001; Frank et al. 2002; Burns (ed.) 2004; Woodward 2005; Rudy/Baert (eds.) 2007; Ganz/Rimmele (eds.) 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Benjamin [1939] 2008.

<sup>117</sup> A well-documented example is the Madonna of Einsiedeln in Eastern Switzerland, a statue whose cult goes back to the late Middle Ages; this statue has a huge wardrobe of dresses that are changed throughout the year, see Zenoni 2015.

<sup>118</sup> See Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1982.



**Fig. 1.10:** Red Byzantine silk with bird motifs, second half of the tenth century, reused as binding for the Seeon Pericopes, before 1012. Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Bibl. 95.

Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett nicely put it, is an illuminative example for the particular power that was frequently assigned to textiles through acts of donation in order to establish human contact with the divine word. Precious cloth was not only required for tailoring Torah mantles (fig. 1.9), it was often used for enveloping Western and Byzantine Christian Gospel books (fig. 1.10), and for wrapping manuscripts of the Qur’an.<sup>119</sup> In Western Europe, pieces of silk could be placed inside holy books, for example on the inner cover, or as curtains to protect illuminations and decorated initials, as we have seen in the miracle tale about Queen Margaret’s Gospels.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, in Hebrew, Christian and Islamic manuscripts we encounter spectacular “carpet pages” that have been interpreted as pictorial representations of—or at least as painted equivalent to—figured fabrics (figs. 1.11–1.13).<sup>121</sup> All these examples show a common preference for

<sup>119</sup> See Wilckens 1990; Coron/Lefèvre (eds.) 1995; Ganz 2015, 32–63; and Robert S. Nelson’s article in this volume.

<sup>120</sup> Sciacca 2007.

<sup>121</sup> For carpet pages in early and high medieval Western manuscripts, see Bücheler 2015; Bücheler 2018; and Anna Bücheler’s

decorating books with materials that were used for tailoring real garments. In this context, it is important to remember that clothing sacred scripture was also a means of connecting holy books to the vestments of the persons that handled them during the ritual. Small and miniature books were produced to be worn attached to the body and therefore became part of the attire of their owners.<sup>122</sup>

### 3.2 Writing

Trying to grasp ornaments of sacred scripture without getting back to the limited notion of pattern, the importance of traces needs to be emphasized. To perceive a carpet page, an initial, a figurative miniature or a treasure binding as ornamental, means to focus on marks of the labor that has been invested in embellishing the book. Looking at these artworks as ornament implies that we imagine the immense effort of drawing lines, coloring areas, weaving threads, chiseling gold and silver foil. To put it again in Peircean terms, it can be argued that the ornamental dimension is constituted by the “indexicality” of surfacescapes: visible and tangible traces of manual processes that require careful selection of materials, skillful handling of working tools and an overall rule of proceeding.<sup>123</sup> Obviously, the ornamental index is not related to spontaneous, individual gestures but to controlled movement according to a definite scheme. In the end, the effort of ornament becomes an efficient testimony of the reverence for the sacred object it decorates, of an attitude of devotion that inspires awe and admiration.

The most obvious example of this aspect in the realm of book-art is the transformation of simple handwriting into elaborate calligraphy. Again, there is no need to use the term in a strictly technical manner and to confine its use to specific book cultures to the exclusion of others.<sup>124</sup>

Calligraphy in a broader sense belongs to the sober surface of Jewish Torah scrolls (fig. 1.14), the overwhelming elegance of Islamic Qur’an manuscripts (fig. 1.15) and to the more pragmatic approach to writing in Christian liturgical books (fig. 1.13).<sup>125</sup> In any case, highlighting the ornamentality of the writing process makes us understand that there is no strict disjuncture between book and book-ornament: the very process of clothing sacred scripture starts with the production of the books themselves. The labor of the scribes merged with the labor of other artisans. Both groups used their tools and materials in ways that should add particular beauty to the appearance of sacred scripture.

Another reason for looking at script as ornament is a common anxiety for appropriate pronunciation of the sacred text, since the books for ritual use that we are considering here, are always related to practices of public recitation. As systems of notation for oral performance, Hebrew and Arabic script differ considerably from Greek and Latin: while the first two are abjads (or consonantal alphabets) based on the notation of consonants only, Greek and Latin are complete phonetic alphabets that comprise graphemes for vowels. As a consequence, diacritical marks are a bigger issue for the rules of writing Qur’ans and Hebrew Bibles than for Christian liturgical manuscripts: the use of vocalization marks is strictly forbidden in the Torah scroll while it is a prominent visual feature in Qur’an and Jewish Bible manuscripts.<sup>126</sup>

Among the most interesting objects in this respect are Jewish Masoretic Bibles that not only contain vocalization marks (*niqud*) and cantillation notes (*te’amim*) but also a huge apparatus of annotations written in micrographic letters (the Masorah) that discuss linguistic properties of the biblical texts and some differences between the written and the spoken words.<sup>127</sup> Initially, the Masorah constituted a metatext that was added to ensure a tradition of correct writing and reading. Yet in the tradition of the *Masorah figurata*, the text of the masoretic annotations is transformed into patterns and images. Sometimes they frame the initial word of a new book, which is set on the page in monumental square script, sometimes

article in this volume. For the particular history of ornamental compositions in Byzantine illumination, see Nelson 1988.

<sup>122</sup> See the article of Romina Ebenhöch und Silke Tammen in this volume.

<sup>123</sup> “Indices are signs which stand for their objects in consequence of a real relation to them. An index is a sign which stands for its object in consequence of having a real relation to it. A pointing finger is its type. Of this sort are all natural signs and physical symptoms. [...] The index asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops.” Peirce, *An Elementary Account of the Logic of Relatives: Index*. MS 537; MS 585 [1886] (eds. M. Bergman/S. Saavola 2014).

<sup>124</sup> This is one major weakness of Grabar’s chapter “The Intermediary of Writing” that shows a strong bias against Western manuscript cultures: “It is in fact difficult to assess the nature, in reality even

the existence, of artistic Writing in western medieval art.” (Grabar 1992, 53).

<sup>125</sup> See Stern 2017, 27–39; George 2010; Cherubini/Pratesi 2010.

<sup>126</sup> In the liturgical use of Christian books, graphemes visualize the *ornatus* of cantillation, such as punctuation, early medieval neumes or later mensural notation. See Haug 2015 and the articles of David Ganz and Bruno Reudenbach in this book.

<sup>127</sup> See Stern 2017, 68–78.



**Fig. 1.11:** Carpet page and incipit of Matthew, Lindisfarne Gospels, ca. 715–720. London, British Library, Cotton Nero D.iv, fol. 26v–27r.

they encircle the entire block of the main text (fig. 1.16), and occasionally they transform into marginal elements such as dragons or plants.<sup>128</sup> That the *Masorah figurata* was actually read seems almost improbable if one considers the continuous movement of the codex or the reader that this task would have required.<sup>129</sup> This means that the Masorah lost its functionality as readable text and gained new power as ornamental text.

<sup>128</sup> See Fronda 2013; Halperin 2013, 5–21, 149–252; Weber 2015.

<sup>129</sup> See Weber 2015, 17.

### 3.3 Material splendor and the critique of book ornament

In the story from Exodus, which I cited in the introduction of this text, the material for the container that will enshrine the Tablets is wood that is covered with a golden surface. Looking at the later history, God's command to Moses sets the tone for the ornament of sacred scripture. Throughout the Middle Ages, the “gold standard” of shimmering surfaces in precious metals or other sumptuous substances has had an enormous influence on the practice of book decoration: there was no element that could not be revetted





Fig. 1.11: (Continued).

with gold, silver, ivory, purple, gemstones, silk etc. At first glance, there seems to be nothing book-specific about these choices, since the same materials play a dominant role in all object categories for sacred rituals, and therefore also in contexts outside of book-religions.<sup>130</sup> This view seems to be corroborated by the fact that richly ornamented copies of sacred scripture could be stored in treasure houses rather than in bookshelves or libraries, in the guise of the collection

of objects that were made for the Tent of the Covenant.<sup>131</sup> Yet a closer look at the Sinai story reveals a more differentiated concept that is based on the combination of gold with specific writing materials, in this case stone. Why stone and not gold? The contrast between stone and gold in the Sinai story points to an implicit tension between the idea of divine writing and the practice of precious and splendid objects, a tension that becomes even more palpable

<sup>130</sup> See Janes 1998.

<sup>131</sup> See Palazzo 1996; Braun-Niehr 2010; Ganz 2015, 225–341; Ganz 2018 (forthcoming).



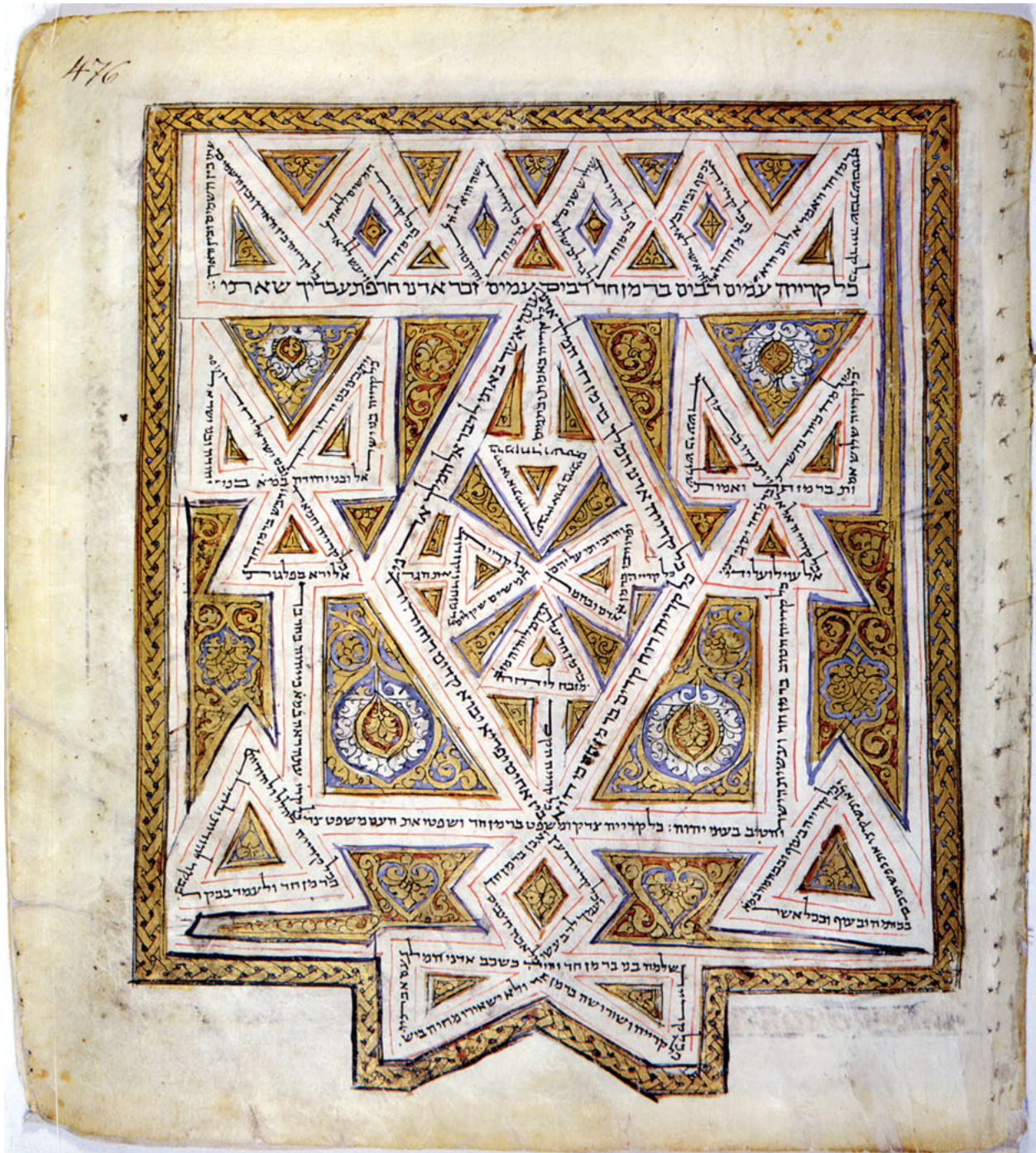


Fig. 1.12: Carpet pages, Leningrad Codex, 1008. St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, EBP IB 19A, fol. 475v–476r.

in the subsequent account of the Golden Calf that Moses' brother Aaron makes from the same substance that is used for the revetment of the Ark. Besides the often highlighted fact that the Calf is an idol while the Tablets represent the origin of sacred scripture, the contrasting materials of these objects add further meaning to these two episodes. In fact, moving on in the account, we learn that on his arrival at the Israelite camp, Moses is so enflamed with rage that

he destroys both objects, the Tablets and the Calf. If stone had been chosen as a durable substance that shall guarantee the longevity of Yahweh's pact with the Israelites, this property turns out to be a relative one. Eventually the whole procedure of making the Tablets has to be repeated (this time with Moses writing down their text).<sup>132</sup> Although this

<sup>132</sup> See Gertz 2016.









Fig. 1.13: Abu Bakr Sandal, carpet pages, volume three of Sultan Baybar's Qur'an, 1304/1306. London, British Library, Add. 22408, fol. 1v–2r.





Fig. 1.13: (Continued).





Fig. 1.14: Exodus 15, Torah scroll, ca. 1155–1255. Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, Rotulo 2.

decked with jewels” while “Christ lies at their door naked and dying.”<sup>133</sup> It is important to note that this sentence is embedded in a letter written for Jerome’s female disciple, Eustochium, and that it comes with the denunciation of wealthy Christian women who have a weakness for luxurious attire.<sup>134</sup> In fact, the assimilation of book

ornament to (female) clothing is a recurrent theme in the critique of precious and splendid book decoration in the Abrahamic religions: its worldly splendor is a seductive distraction from content that is not from this world, and the cost of these objects is not an expression of reverence but a symptom of their owners’ pomposity. This connects

<sup>133</sup> Hieronymus, *Epistolae*, 22,23 (ed. Wright 1933, 130–133).

<sup>134</sup> Ganz 2015, 57–58. Jerome takes a similar stance, this time associating the clothing of scripture with oriental costume, in his letter to Laeta regarding the education of her daughter Paula: “Instead of jewels and silk let her love the manuscripts the manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures, and in them let her prefer correctness and accurate punctuation to gilding and Babylonian parchment with elaborate decoration.” Hieronymus, *Epistolae*, 107,12 (ed. Wright 1933, 364–365). Correctness and accuracy of the text are the inner values of books from which material luxury detracts, a position that is most prominently

corroborated in Jerome’s preface to Job (to be included in all copies of the *Vulgata* version) which characterizes golden books as burden: “Let those who will keep the old books with their gold and silver letters on purple skins, or, to follow the ordinary phrase, in ‘uncial characters,’ loads of writing rather than manuscripts, if only they will leave for me and mine, our poor pages and copies which are less remarkable for beauty than for accuracy.” Hieronymus, *Praefatio in librum Iob* (ed. Schaff/Wace 1890, 492). See Nordenfalk 1970, 89–96; Kendrick 1999, 36–39; Kearney 2009, 11–12. On earlier criticism of chrysography by pagan authors, see Ernst 1994, 350–351.



Fig. 1.15: Ornate text pages written in rayani script, Qur'an of Sultan Faraj ibn Barquq, early fifteenth century. London, British Library, Or. 848, fol. 26v–27r.

the critical voice of the Roman cardinal with the Islamic legislation that from the ninth century onwards rejected the use of gold for Qur'an manuscripts.<sup>135</sup>

While we can observe a convergence in content of ornament critique in medieval Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they differ greatly in their status: ornament critique in Islamic communities, but also in Jewish regulation regarding the production of the Torah scroll is to be found in normative texts,<sup>136</sup> whereas the remarks of Christian authors of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages have an incidental character.<sup>137</sup> Relatively late, with the estab-

lishment of monastic orders such as the Cistercians, the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the twelfth and thirteenth century, do we encounter norms that try to ban gold ink and polychromy from holy books.<sup>138</sup> A new desire for

were not given to us to have them in books but to engrave them in our hearts." For an overview on chrysography in the classical and Western medieval tradition, see Trost 1991, especially 6–35; Ernst 1994.

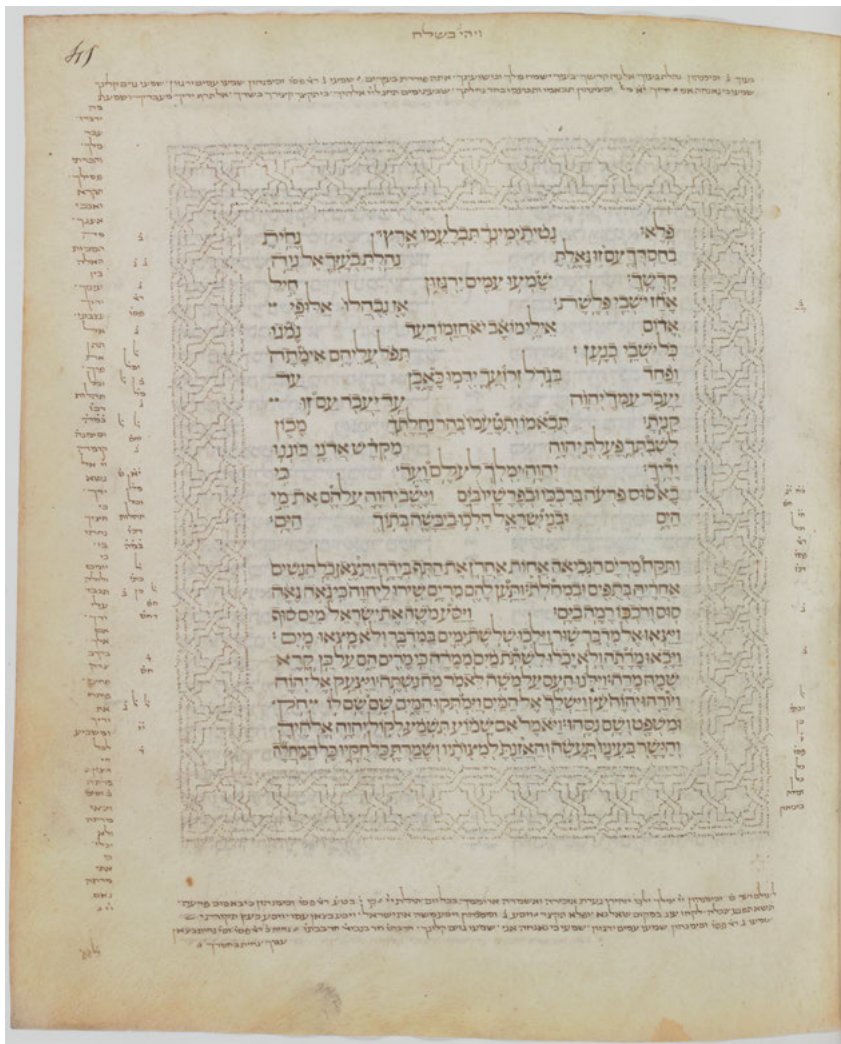
<sup>138</sup> See for example Idung of St Emmeram, *Dialogus duorum monachorum*, 1,36 (ed. Huygens 1980, 105–106) where the Cistercian monk says: "Beautiful pictures, variegated works of goldsmithery, both decorated with gold [...] beautiful and precious windows from gem-like stained-glass, choir-mantles and chasubles decorated with orphrey, golden and encrusted chalices, and golden letters in the books. All this is not required by necessity of use but by the appetite of the eyes." In 1330/1340, the Franciscan Alvarus Pelagius complains in his *Lament over the Church*: "The pride of clerics and religious in gilded and illuminated books which are clad into silken fabrics and silver is deplorable. Knowledge does not abide in gold, since neither gold nor the precious stone compare to it [...] Carry books with you, especially those of parchment. The brethren do not dare to lend beautiful books nor do they study in them. They keep them closed in their cells, shut with four clasps out of pride and avarice; the more they own, the less they generally know." Alvarus Pelagius 1570, 207 (II.76).

<sup>135</sup> On this topic, see the article of Finbarr Barry Flood in this volume.

<sup>136</sup> Prescriptions for the production of the Torah scroll are found in the Talmudic *Soferim*, dating from the mid-eighth century, which speaks out against the use of writing in gold or in purple, see Tov 2004, 54.

<sup>137</sup> Another early critique comes from John Chrysostom, see Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homiliae LXXXVIII in Ioannem*, 32.3 (ed. Migne 1862, 187): "I hear of no one who strives for understanding books but rather of those who are concerned with having them written in golden letters. But which is the profit emerging from this? For scriptures





**Fig. 1.16:** Opening with Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), Sephardic Bible, 1232. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. héb. 25, fol. 40v–41r.

rigor and ascetism articulates a new interest in the interior values of scripture. This tendency will intensify in the later Middle Ages with the rise of a larger book market in Western Europe and a wider accessibility of books. In Richard de Bury's famous *Philobiblon*, this new situation is echoed by the books' complaints about a division of labor by which the making of ornament appears as an illiterate activity:

We [the books] will add the last clause of our long lament though far too short for the materials that we have. In us the natural use is changed to that which is against nature, while we who are the light of faithful souls everywhere fall a prey to painters knowing nought of letters, and are entrusted to goldsmiths to become, as though we were not sacred vessels of wisdom, repositories of gold-leaf.<sup>139</sup>

The question remains how these criticisms affected the practice of book production. As in the case of sumptuary laws regulating dress we may assume that rules of interdiction react to deviating realities. But speaking of deviance already implies that we adopt the perspective of ornament criticism. The fact that Cistercian monks and Franciscan friars commissioned lavish manuscripts, that Islamic rulers continued to order copies of the Qur'an with a certain amount of decoration in gold, and that according to the sources there even existed Torah scrolls written in gold ink, points to implicit models and plausibilities of ornamental efficacy that could not be easily overruled.<sup>140</sup> Instead, there seem to have been spaces of negotiation in which artists, commissioners and users could react to critical allegations without simply obeying them. For

<sup>139</sup> Bury, *Philobiblon*, IV (ed. Thomas 1960, 33).

<sup>140</sup> Although Torah scrolls with gold writing are mentioned in early sources, as Tov 2004, 54 points out.

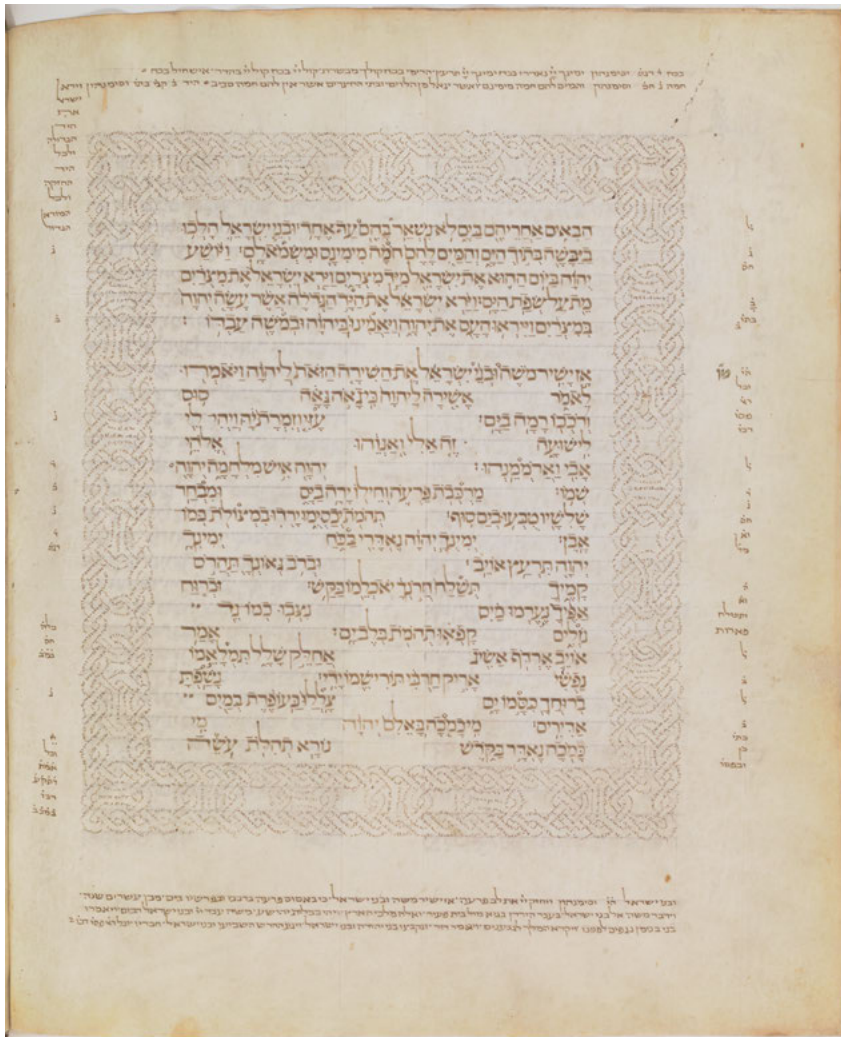


Fig. 1.16: (Continued).

example, in the production of Qur'an manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries, Alain George has observed a tendency towards shrinking formats, lighter and cheaper materials (paper instead of parchment).<sup>141</sup> The application of gold continued, but with the exception of deluxe editions such as the Blue Qur'an it was limited to chapter headings, chapter dividers, carpet pages and other decorative elements (fig. 1.15).

The tension between the critique of and the desire for ornament paved the way for strategies of self-legitimation of ornament. In Christian Gospel books and Psalters of the Carolingian period, poems were added that justified the use of golden letters and purple dye with their ability to open access to the golden halls of heaven and the blood of

the Savior (fig. 1.2).<sup>142</sup> Gold was always said to be splendid and shining, and therefore closely associated with light.<sup>143</sup> Complementary to that, a strong link connected the Word of God to light in the imagination of all Abrahamic religions. It is under this close association of both the Word of God and gold with light that golden letters, golden illuminations or golden envelopes could be understood as enhancing the contact with the divine.<sup>144</sup>

On the book cover of the Codex Aureus of St Emmeram, the goldsmiths working for the Carolingian emperor Charles the Bald depicted the story of Christ's

<sup>142</sup> See Ganz 1987, 30–31. For further examples, see Ernst 1994, 357–364.

<sup>143</sup> Schellewald 2014.

<sup>144</sup> See Vladimir Ivanovici's article in this volume.

<sup>141</sup> See George 2010, 143–146.





**Fig. 1.17:** Christ and the Adulteress, Front cover of the Codex Aureus of St Emmeram (detail), 870. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14000.

encounter with the adulteress (fig. 1.17).<sup>145</sup> As the Gospel of John reports (Ioh. 8,2–11), Christ wrote with his finger on the ground when he was asked for his opinion about the woman caught in adultery. Remarkably, this is the only instance in which the Bible explicitly mentions Jesus as writer, and therefore performing the same activity as the four evangelists that are depicted on the cover, but also the same activity as the scribes that actually produced the Gospel book. With regard to the writing materials, this picture plays with an interesting contrast between the poor writing material that Christ uses in the story and the precious material that was used by the goldsmiths and by the scribes that wrote this codex entirely in golden letters.

<sup>145</sup> Front cover with gold repoussé, emeralds, sapphires, pearls and colored glass on wood. Back cover and spine early modern. For a contemporary Gospel book. See Ganz 2015, 179–182; Ganz 2018 (forthcoming).

### 3.4 Diagrammatic constellations

In his fundamental reflection on the ornament of Insular book art, Jean-Claude Bonne has mostly highlighted the importance of “intrication” as a basic structural device for illuminated initials, carpet pages and even narrative miniatures (figs. 1.11–1.13, 1.16).<sup>146</sup> For Bonne, intrication is a key for understanding ornament as “modus operandi” that goes beyond the formal limited sense of repeated patterns. Interlacing, knotting and weaving are operations that create connectivity between elements, relating them to each other. In this respect, clothing sacred scripture may develop a strong affinity to diagrammatic compositions whose importance has been recently re-evaluated in the wake of the pictorial turn.<sup>147</sup> This re-appraisal has opened up new ways of approaching the pictorial potential of abstract, non-figurative “graphic elements” that extend significantly beyond an iconographic decoding of symbolic signs. The decisive consideration in this context is the ability of schematic formations to make relations between elements evident: through positional correspondences, chromatic correlations and by classification as a particular type.<sup>148</sup> In Jewish, Christian and Islamic visual cultures, diagrams were an important medium that permitted visualizing invisible orders, concepts or rules. These practices had a shared foundation in antique models of schematic visualization that had been developed in areas such as geometry, astronomy, optics or land survey and that were subsequently adopted by medieval authors.<sup>149</sup> In this sense, the exchange with scientific images constituted an important intellectual stimulus for the decoration of sacred scripture.<sup>150</sup>

Diagrammatic elements can be found in most of the images that accompany this essay. Here, I want to concentrate on an early medieval Christian example, the Ottonian book cover of the Reichenau Gospels (fig. 1.18),

<sup>146</sup> See Bonne 2000.

<sup>147</sup> See Gormans 2000; Bogen/Thürlemann 2003; Bogen 2005; Krämer 2012; Schmidt-Burkhardt 2012; Krämer/Ljungberg 2016.

<sup>148</sup> This relational understanding goes back to Peirce who defined diagrams as a subcategory of iconic signs: “The Diagram represents a definite Form of Relation. This Relation is usually one that actually exists, as in a map, or is intended to exist, as in a Plan. [...] The pure Diagram is designed to represent and to render intelligible, the Form of Relation merely. Consequently, Diagrams are restricted to the representation of a certain class of relations; namely, those that are intelligible.” Peirce, *Prolegomena for an Apology of Pragmatism* [1906] (ed. Eisele 1976, 315–316). See Engel/Queisner/Viola 2012; Krämer/Ljungberg 2016.

<sup>149</sup> For an overview, see Murdoch 1984; Bonhoff 1993; Charette 2005. For diagrams in Christian Europe, see Gormans 1999; Eastwood 2007; Müller 2008; Lutz/Jerjen/Putzo (eds.) 2014. For diagrams in Islamic countries, see King 1995.

<sup>150</sup> See Esmeijer 1978; Kühnel 2003; Hamburger 2009.



**Fig. 1.18:** Cross composition, Front cover, Reichenau Gospels, early eleventh century. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4454.

beginning with a short comparison with the book cover of the Gospels from Niederaltaich (fig. 1.7).<sup>151</sup> Although both compositions have the cross as the central motif, there is a categorical difference between them. In the second case, the cross is the representation of an object that is embedded in a narrative composition. In the first case, in contrast, the cross is a schematised object, symmetrical both along the horizontal and vertical axes, directly abutting all four sides of the cover's framing bands and thus structuring the binding's entire surface. In this constellation, the cross is no longer simply a sign, but a schematic grapheme that visually relates to other schematic forms traced on the cover such as the lozenge, the diagonal cross and the rectangle, and thus affords scope for relationships to assume thematic importance, such as the four-to-one ratio, the complementarity of enclosing and enclosed forms, or the tension between big and small structures.

The geometrical figures that we encounter here are not semantically “empty.” In a first instance, cross, lozenge,

rectangle and diagonal cross are encoded as schematic representations of the Christian cosmos with its cascade of “fournesses”: the four cardinal points, the four winds, the four seasons, the four elements, the four rivers of paradise etc.<sup>152</sup> At the same time, the arrangement of these figures invites the viewer to think about the structure of the book that is behind the cover, a book composed of four, intricately interwoven parts—in other words, to understand this composition as a diagram in self-referential terms. It is not so much the “architecture” of the Gospels in general that is visualised here but rather the participation of this specific book in that architecture. In a certain way, the cover represents an ambiguous figure that is related both to the world and to the book. Such ambiguity is further enhanced by the lack of textual elements: in diagrams in a narrower sense, inscriptions are a constitutive element that allows the identification of elements of reference. Whereas diagrams of this type follow a logic of iconic representation, the diagrammatic ornament of sacred scripture confronts the viewer with a much more ambiguous structure. As Oleg Grabar observed with regard to the Qur'an frontispiece from Şan'ā' (fig. 1.1):

But if one imagines all these architectural compositions as evocations and as intermediary filters that modify the spaces in front or ahead of them—the sanctuary of a mosque or a book—then one can indeed propose to see them as covering with beauty and well-being their mundane or sacred environment. They succeed, or at least were meant to succeed, because they evoke rather than represent. Precision of depiction is needed for them to be buildings, but the specificity of that precision is secondary to their power of evocation.<sup>153</sup>

Deliberate visual ambiguities can be noticed in the decoration of many Christian, Jewish and Islamic books. Also on carpet pages and book covers of Qur'ans and Jewish Bibles (figs. 1.12–1.13, 1.16, 1.19), an eschewal of textual markers is combined with a condensation of lines and forms that opposes a decipherable meaning. Decorative compositions are generated by a concatenation of figures, be it circles, triangles, squares, pentagons or organic forms, enhancing their degree of interrelatedness. This excess of intrication is the quintessence of ornament-specific effects of interlinking and intertwining that counteract a separation of clearly delineated elements. What they suggest is ornament's preference for compositions that have no beginning and no end.<sup>154</sup> Yet in each case it is fundamental to look at the specific traditions that

<sup>151</sup> The cover has been analyzed in detail by Katharina Theil in her unpublished M.A. thesis, see Theil 2016. See also Ganz 2015, 85–100, 307–315; Ganz 2017 (b).

<sup>152</sup> This cosmological aspect has been emphasized in older literature, see Elbern 1955/1956; Werckmeister 1964; Steenbock 1965, 28–32.

<sup>153</sup> Grabar 1992, 191.

<sup>154</sup> See Bonne 2000.





Fig. 1.19: Leather binding with blind and gold tooling, Qur'an from Marrakesh, early thirteenth century. London, British Library, Or. 13192.



informed the use of diagrammatic structures in a given community. With regard to the grid-based *giriḥ* patterns in Islamic art for example (figs. 1.15, 1.19), Gülru Necipoğlu has analysed in full detail how ornamental practices were based on a specific mathematical and theological background of speculation about proportion, light and perception.<sup>155</sup>

## 4 Concluding remarks

At the end of this paper I would like to come back to the story that I mentioned in my introduction. We are now in the position to better understand the seriousness of the accident that happened to the Gospels of Queen Margaret. When ornate books fall into the water, there is more at stake than a loss of precious property, and much more than a loss of just one piece of writing. What sinks between the waves is the investment in sacred scripture, the belief that arduous labor, sumptuous materials and exceptional skill had the power to transform the book into an auratic object, into a visible and tangible medium of a transcendent divinity. Not by chance, plunging holy books into water is one option for the disposal of worn copies of the Qur'an. Yet in Turgot's story, instead of an involuntary book-burial a thaumaturgic rediscovery of the book takes place. The rescue of the book can be celebrated as a miracle that reinstated the belief in the efficacy of this investment. Even more than that, under water a revelation of sacred scripture is performed: the book is opened, the pages are moved, the curtains above the initials lifted. Instead of washing the letters away, the waves reveal them to the eye. As the book reemerges clothed and not naked, the miracle accredits the eminent role of sacred scripture's ornament. The following articles will demonstrate how multifaceted and productive the practice of clothing sacred scripture was in Jewish, Christian and Islamic book-cultures of the Middle Ages.

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<sup>155</sup> Necipoğlu 1995, 131–215.



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